Feminine Writing: Text as Dolls, Drag and Ventriloquism

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This article provides a case study of feminine writing, including the production of text in the form of a series of three dolls. It seeks to broaden ideas about what is acceptable as research including notions of ‘data’ and representation. To do this it employs the written word, but includes fiction, asking if this is ‘fictional truth’. The article considers the position of women in organizations through the creation of three rag dolls which represent the author’s experience of women in organization. This is followed by three fictional ‘interviews’ with the dolls in which they describe their experiences of organizing and being organized in a gendered world. The paper ends with a reflection on the usefulness and validity of this arts methodology and outlines the feminist critique of organizations and organizing that the method reveals. I describe this as feminine writing because it troubles or queers conventional academic writing by producing a text (the dolls and the fiction) which is rich in embodiment and affect, and which has a feminist project: that of exposing the myriad ways in which women and organizations may be seen (and are seen in this article) as incompatible.

Keywords: feminine writing, fiction in research, dolls and doll making, gender

Got myself a crying, talking, sleeping, walking, living doll  
...........................................  
I’m gonna lock her up in a trunk  
So no big hunk can steal her away from me  

(Lionel Bart, 1959)

Introduction

Text is marks on paper. Text is black on white. Academic text spills down a page until it pools into a puddle of conclusion and flows out into rivulets of citation. It apparently flows as easily as water. It represents the culmination of our processes as academics, the runnels of propositions coursing through our words and flowing into lakes of monographs and learned articles. As the torrents sweep along, they carve channels into the bedrock. Even as our texts stream past, paradoxically, they contribute to permanent fixed grooves which others’ texts must then pass along. Although we know that there might be more interesting things to explore, we continue to navigate these well-established channels and we are reluctant to leave them and explore other areas and possibilities.

This text approaches things rather differently. It proposes two very different routes towards veridicality. It suggests that we take seriously the importance of material objects in our scholarship, and that we give a fair hearing to the idea that fiction can be as truthful as peer-reviewed, scientifically rigorous research.

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In this paper, I shall present three rag dolls and three short pieces of writing. These six artefacts will explore what I know about gender, femininity and being a woman in organizations from my own embodied experience. The artefacts deliberately shake themselves free of the usual social science method of citation upon citation, a method of layering gaps and holes, of producing a tissue of lacunae and fissures according to de Certeau (1986). In addition they refuse the notion of finality in research. To quote from Paul Carter, the aim of this paper is ‘to integrate text-based knowledge with the plastic wisdom of the craftsman’ (Carter, 2004, p. xii) in order to say something about the female experience of organization.

Why choose dolls?

I have always loved dolls. I spent hours of my childhood playing with them, making clothes for them, telling stories to myself with and through them. As a child I saved up my pocket money to buy dolls and their accessories, I swapped dolls with school friends, and I scavenged like a Borrower to find tiny things to include in my elaborate room sets for my fashion dolls. I have two dolls sitting on my desk as I write. It is hardly surprising, then, that dolls should eventually come to play a significant part in my research career.

This is, however, a risky move. Dolls and serious academic work do not sit easily together. Playing with dolls, as this paper does, is what children and not what adults do, as we put away childish things. Dolls do not fit the tables and taxonomies that feature so prominently in constructions of research quality. Despite their materiality, they dissolve before the calculating eye which decides what to include in the institutional audits of teaching quality. This is not a course of action for those with what John van Maanen calls ‘academic career aspirations’ (van Maanen, 1988, p. 134); better keep this sort of work for when you have your Chair. Although this is very good advice, I have a strong commitment to working with material objects, and, as a maker of textiles, to art as research (see Porter and Rippin, 2012; Rippin, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2013; Wicks and Rippin, 2010). I agree with Paul Carter when he states:

the distinctive character of creative research [is] to show how the process of material thinking enables us to think differently about our human situation, and by displaying in a tangible but non-reductive form its inevitable complexity, to demonstrate the great role works of art can play in the ethical project of becoming (collectively and individually) oneself in a particular place. Nor is this in the least a solipsistic benefit. To understand how identities form, how relationships with others are actively invented (and therefore susceptible to reinvention), is essential knowledge if societies are to sustain themselves. (Carter, 2004, p. xii, emphasis original)

Under this reading, the dolls are not art for art’s sake, but a way of making visible the performative processes that create our gendered identities. This kind of knowledge often remains invisible or hidden in plain view. Because these processes are enacted so frequently, we tend to overlook them and read them as natural when we do notice them. Using an instrument like a doll, which is also familiar as well as strange, as I shall go on to discuss, allows us to bring these occluded practices into sharp focus.

Reason and Rowan (1981) suggest what they call an extended epistemology in which a variety of forms of knowing are valued. Propositional knowing with which we are familiar is present and valued, but so too is presentational knowledge, subtle, embodied, often pre-linguistic knowledge that has to be expressed through gesture, sound, artefact. This is the knowledge upon which this paper is based: what it is like to be female in an organization from the viewpoint of one woman situated in a particular time and a particular place. When I work with materials in an academic mode I aim to create an object which will be part of a process of making
meaning, understanding, knowledge. The object is an analogue for the phenomenon I wish to consider and it invites conversation. Danny Miller states:

It is human labour that transforms nature into objects, creating this mirror in which we can come to understand who we are. So labour produces culture in the form of stuff. (Miller, 2010, p. 58)

One of the reasons that I am committed to art as a research method is that it is particularly good at embodying ambiguity. When I have worked with students using arts-based methods, they have often made two-sided objects showing the fragmented and often schizophrenic nature of their organizations: the public-facing efficiency machine versus the internal shambles, or the values-driven public strategy versus the shareholder-value imperative. These have been shown by masks, two-sided cushions, cakes and their fillings and so on. Dolls are particularly well suited to this. I have made a two-ended doll using the Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, or the Witch and the Fairy forms of children’s dolls. My doll showed the Nike Corporation as a patriotic American child on one end and a child making shoes in sweatshop conditions at the other. Dolls work well in this capacity not least because they are so ambivalent. I love dolls, as I have said, but other people do not. There are many people who find dolls sinister and threatening. They are a staple of horror stories and horror movies. The payoff to Susan Hill’s novel, Dolly illustrates this. The discarded doll will not leave her owner alone:

Deep under the earth, inside its cardboard coffin, shrouded in the layers of white paper, the china doll with the jagged open crevasse in its skull was crying. (Hill, 2012, p. 18)

Dolls are marvellously ambiguous things. They can be comforting companions and objects of delight, happy reminders of childhood play and in possession of the miniature forms that appear to bring delight to so many different cultures (Bailey, 2010). But equally dolls are unnerving things. They are involved in magic: consider voodoo dolls (Farquharson, 2012); consider plastic baby dolls which upset some people with their life-like appearance and make them feel very uncomfortable. And above all, dolls epitomize Freud’s notion of the Unheimliche (2003 [1919]), something which unnerves us and frightens us, chiefly because it is on the borderland between life and death, and we never quite know with dolls. Are they animate or inanimate? Even when the doll seems dead and broken, in Hill’s narrative it lives on in its grave to wreak havoc. Kuznets (1994) gives a full and fascinating account of the literary trope of toys coming to life. This in itself is ambiguous, as Wood states, a ‘child’s wish that a doll will come to life can turn into an adult fear’ (Wood, 2002, p. xiv). And that fear is no longer simply of homicidal dolls turning on their owners, Woods hints at the technophobia in our attitude to dolls, ‘Mixed in with the magic and the marvel is a fear: that we can be replicated all too easily’ (Wood, 2002, p. xiv). Kuznets refers to our ‘dreadful vulnerability’ mirrored by the doll which is subject to the contingent terrors of the world (Kuznets, 1994, p. 2). Dolls, then, can stimulate our anxiety and help us to manage it. At the end of her research on toys coming to life in children’s literature, Kuznets (1994) reports:

I had underrated the extent to which toys play out anxieties about violent mutilation, deformity and rejection by loved ones and reveal the anger and depression that pervades survivors of suffering. (p. 2)

Because they are complicated, because they are ambivalent and because they are covetable and delightful as well as ugly and repellent, dolls seemed to me to be an excellent vehicle for starting to make strange conventional academic writing, because the doll as much as the written paper or monograph, is a text which can be read, deconstructed, critiqued and reconstructed in particularly subtle ways. To read a doll fully you must pick it up, turn it round, hold it, weigh it, and in my experience of working with dolls, it is not long before people start to undress them, and at the very least inspect their underwear.
Geri Olson (1998) proposes doll-making as a form of expressive art and art therapy, and facilitates workshops which integrate doll-making with reflection, writing and dialogue, attracting educators, therapists, parents and students. She identifies the particular strengths associated with doll-making. In contrast with many art forms, including human-like figurines or statues, there is more of an expectation of interaction with dolls. Whilst historically used ritualistically, in modern times, dolls are associated with play and thus continue to integrate what Olson refers to as the real and ‘imaginal’ worlds. Such play is therefore a way through which to tell the story, and history, of the inner world of both persons and cultures, and ‘keep these alive’ (Olson, 2008). Olson links doll-making with forms of consciousness that celebrate the unconscious, including dream work and the surrealist arts movement. Her emphasis is on accessing and reclaiming, for therapeutic purposes, the role of dolls in ‘the imaginal life of many cultures’ and in ‘the human process of constructing meaning by combining art and ritual in daily life’ (1998, p. 48). The process of making dolls, then, is important. Over and above the cognitive work involved in writing conventional articles, making a doll as an object of both inquiry and representation involves engaging with all these cultural and imaginal elements.

Pinkola Estés argues that, for centuries, dolls have been imbued with both holiness and mana, where the latter is a Melanesian word appropriated by Jung to describe the magical quality stemming from certain people, places and talismans. Pinkola Estés reminds us that the mana experience is ‘pragmatic and mystical at the same time; it both informs and moves’ (1992, p. 483). She points to the practical and ultimately self-developmental ways of knowing potentially evoked by dolls as instinctual-symbolic representations of ‘intuition’. Making a doll allows and indeed forces access to the unspoken in our scholarship: our hunches and affective responses to our areas of inquiry. And in letting the dolls speak, as we shall see, we gain access to knowledge that exists in tandem with our propositional work.

Significantly, the art therapy literature such as Olson’s approaches doll-making from an integrative lens: whilst acknowledging that the process is likely to be disturbing, the possibility of subsequent healing is highlighted. Bringing together our knowledges rather than unified knowledge both enriches the study and allows healing in the researcher, a form of reparation which we seldom admit to being needed. This paper has its origins in my anger and pain at my experience of being a woman, and a woman in the academy in particular. It makes a small plea for the inclusion in our work of elements other than the bibliographic and the propositional. That plea is as small and fragile as a cloth doll.

Meanwhile, Kitti Carriker’s literary analysis develops a deeper understanding of the tensions and anxieties foregrounded by engagement with dolls, which raise impediments to the restorative engagement advocated by the art therapy school. In her analysis of literary works involving hand-made and/or miniature ‘doubles’, Carriker draws on Freud’s (1919) Das Unheimliche, or the Uncanny and Kristeva’s (1982) concept of the Abject to explore the psychological implications of [dolls’] creation and the extent and the limitations of the power they hold, if indeed any, over the humans who have served as their models and creators. (Carriker, 1998, p. 9)

To the extent that the doll represents a ‘double’ (see Rank, 1971 [1914]), it is potentially a manifestation of what Freud refers to as the ‘uncanny’: that which is both ‘terrible and terribly familiar’ (Carriker, 1998, p. 50), simultaneously evoking fear and fascination. Following Freud and Rank, Carriker (1998, p. 10) points to the life/death paradox within the double: ‘From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death’. Carriker’s analysis highlights the psychological disruptions precipitated by the dualities and paradoxes manifested through dolls as reflections of ‘self’. As an alter ego, or doppelgänger, dolls...
expose and problematize the sometimes facile distinctions between life and death, subject and object, human and inhuman, self and other. In imbuing dolls with subjectivity, humanity and self-hood, uncanny questions about our own positioning within these apparent dualisms may be raised.

As Carriker indicates, in her reading of Freud’s *The ‘Uncanny’*, Cixous (1976, p. 538) poses thought-provoking questions regarding humans’ relationship with hand-made doubles or automatons. Cixous asks: ‘What if she [the automaton] were alive? What if, in looking at her, we animated her?’ In the stories which Carriker analyses, this is an enthralling and yet frightening prospect for the characters involved: for example, in much of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s fiction ‘an other or double is called into being and subsequently erased, absorbed, or otherwise done away with’ (Carriker, 1998, p. 51).

Dolls, then, far from being simply inert matter, appear to be imbued with an otherworldliness or *Unheimlichkeit* which makes them particularly appropriate to explore the shadow side of organization (see, e.g., Egan, 2007; Linstead et al., 2014).

**Working with the dolls**

The first stage of the process is to make the doll. I begin with a blank doll made up from a pile of pre-prepared elements (see Figure 1).

Usually when I make dolls for research I sit down with no idea of what will emerge. This is a particularly helpful way of tapping into the unconscious, embodied, affective knowledges I have amassed. Although they seem to appear very quickly and spontaneously, they are the result of a lifetime of observation and reflection. On this occasion, however, I knew that I wanted to make a doll in a suit, a doll dressed in white and an orientalist doll. That aside, I did not have a real plan, and I fitted the clothes to the doll as I went along. This process sometimes reveals further insights, such as the constructed fabric for the suit that the first doll wears and describes in her ‘interview’. It was cut from a large piece of layered and stitched scrap fabric which I then painted over in black. I used a roller to cover the fabric which left behind flashes of colour in the indentations caused by the stitches (see Figure 2). This caused me to reflect on the notion of women in suits being women in disguise, but that disguise always being faulty and always ready to betray.

In the next stage of the process I give the dolls voice. At this stage, I sit the doll on my desk, open up the computer and ask her to tell me her story. As she speaks, I type. I am aware that this might sound odd, but I suspect that most people have had the sensation of something inanimate communicating with them, if only a soup or a sauce telling them it needs more salt or lemon juice. It is a variation on the automatic writing processes which were used by the twentieth-century Surrealists (although without the involvement of psychic or spiritual voices in my case). In this process I am aware that I am using the doll as a projective technique, and that it is my own voice that I am listening to. In the present case it represents my years of working in large bureaucracies with strong masculinist cultures. It might be argued that it is the part of myself which has been damaged by these hostile environments which has found voice, as mentioned above. The process is one of the wounded part of my psyche seeking reparation. This process might be termed by critics of art as research as over-subjective, cathartic, or flawed — subject to the criticism that van Maanen describes as the shrill howl of ‘The bastards are making it up’ (van Maanen, 1988, p. 134). This is a frequent critique of methods such as autoethnography, as self-indulgent clap trap (Gottschalk, 1998; Watson, 1995). I believe that the dolls and their stories matter because they are testimony to what life is like for one woman in large organizations in a specific time and place which may be of help to others either experiencing or studying.
such organizations. They are detailed, specific and immediate. They make no claim to universal-
ity or generalizability or statistical significance. They do claim to evoke a very particular con-
sciousness and a very particular experience, a rich description of a reflective practitioner’s
participation in gendered cultures.

With that in mind, we can now turn to the dolls themselves and to their stories.

The dolls

The dolls are rag dolls, made specifically to investigate my experience of gender in organization. They are roughly half a metre tall. The first doll explores the trope of the male work suit and what happens when women try to wear them; the second looks at the Othering of women and other groups which goes on in organizations; and the third looks at the suspicion of the dec-
orated woman in workplaces.

A Woman in a Man’s Suit (Figure 3)

I wore my suit like armour. I put it on, and I took on the boys. I liked the way it fitted. I liked the way it allowed me to move through the worlds of the street and the train and the tube and the tram and then into the atrium and up into the lift and then to my desk. I moved unrestrainedly.
When I moved it moved with me. When I sat down it draped elegantly. It was all speed and efficiency. When I got up in the morning it was ready and I only had to choose my blouse, my earrings, maybe my killer heels. I liked my suits dark. Charcoal grey, navy blue, black, pinstriped. I liked a good, elegant cut, my bottom covered, my hips smoothed out. My buttons were done up. I was protected, neutral, asexual, a worker not a woman. Dressed in black, perfectly pressed, elegant in cut, cloth and detail, I passed as one of the men. I had entry to the club.2

Why, it sometimes struck me in that club, did we all dress as if going to a society funeral?3 The labels were all there: Hugo Boss, Armani, Paul Smith, Prada. A great deal of money had been spent on this negation of colour and life. We were all showing how serious we were about the business. We were never frivolous. We were neat and sober, serious, civil, diplomatic, self-controlled, hard working and a team. Our individuality was reduced to the smart tie or snazzy sock. The impression we gave overall was of a group of worthies who could be trusted to run a multinational, an empire as big, potentially, as Philip of Spain’s as he sat in his tiny room dressed in black, mourning his dead wife and setting the tone for serious contenders to power in his own black-clad Habsburg court and in the rest of the known-world. Never trust a man in two-tone shoes, my father said. It is advice which has stood the test of time. We dressed alike in the hive and things got done, but, at the risk of mixing my metaphors, I could not help but wonder what we had come to the burial of — what was dying, to what were we moved to pay our respects?

But, that costume is designed for men. There are schools of thought that the suit descends from the suit of armour, a second skin for warrior men forged from sheets of metal, not from soft, yielding cloth. There are precious few suits of armour for women. Our place has never been on the battlefield or other arenas of male violence, unless we were Athena, or nurses in our crisp white aprons and hats. Our clothing kept us out, kept our bodies largely concealed around our places of generation, distracted the gaze through modesty. That costume, the male suit with its
unchanging jacket, trousers, waistcoat, shirt and tie, is continuity. It marks, and goes on marking, that unchanging male sphere: the outside world. The suit is made to encase men in a series of tubes and cylinders which do not vary, and through their unchanging nature gather strength through persistence. Men in suits, men in black, just are. Women with their fashion and transient fads just cannot be trusted. If they cannot be trusted to commit to a style of dress, how can they be expected to show allegiance to a business?

Gradually, it occurred to me that I did not fit. My clothes did not fit me. Although I thought that I belonged, it gradually became apparent that putting my dog in a waistcoat or shirt and tie would have been as convincing as putting me in suit and sending me into the homosocial club of the big corporation. I can see now that my suit was about as much use to me in trying to pass as the false moustache I now tie on. All the best drag queens let it slide. They wipe off their lipstick, or pull off their wigs or growl at the audience in a deep baritone; they undermine the act. I did not need to let it slide. It slid. A woman in a suit might think that she is passing as one of the boys, but she cannot help becoming an eroticized figure. Let me point you to the trope of the lingerie peeping suggestively out from under the jacket. Why is that such a powerful cultural image? Why in an era of underwear as outerwear, of bra straps plainly in view under summer dresses and lacy tops, does erotica still have recourse to a woman in a man’s suit with a bra underneath? When a man wears a shirt under his suit it suggests a clean, pressed, lined and invulnerable second skin. When you glimpse my bra under my jacket I am suddenly rendered vulnerable. It might be that I engage in ‘the enterprising feminine drama of exposure’, but this is not a drama of my composing. I am rendered weak, defenceless, once again the potential victim. I might have borrowed the aggressor’s clothing, but I am still victim, still the passive one in the dyad. Gender divisions remain untroubled. In fact, the erotic possibilities of the conquest of

Figure 3: A Woman in a Man’s Suit
a female body which is trying unsuccessfully to present itself as self-possessed, confident, invulnerable, integrated and complete are heightened as the drag performance falters.

As all this dawns on me, I feel the colour drain from the cloth. The virtuous, dependable, colour that is not a colour, black starts to fade and leach from my suit. The seams are exposed as the colour is discharged. Flashes of pink, purple, red, spruce green, citrus yellow and white start to emerge. A floral pattern rises from the surface. A frivolous trim appears at my wrists and round my hem. The whole thing frays. It is revealed to be what it is, an expensive counterfeit of something much smoother and more stable: the dark male business suit. I am left looking either like a high concept fashionista, or a clown in motley depending on your take. Either way, I am not welcome at the top table, in the boardroom, in the boys’ club.

The Other (Figure 4)

It is late afternoon in the harem. The light filters in through the pierced screen. The air is heavy with the scent of flowers, often at its fullest around dusk. I stretch out on the divan. Behind me a fan wafts gently. Glittering in silk and gold and jewels, I await my lord’s pleasure this evening.

That is what they want me to say. They want me to be unrestrained, idle, voluptuous, wanton and passive at the same time. They have an idea of the East that they do not want me to challenge. They have an idea of the Other. And since the earliest days of colonization and imperialism, that Other is me, not just a woman but a stereotype of a woman at that.

When the British were setting up their empire they were extremely glad to see me in my outlandish costume, in my trousers, in all those diaphanous folds. They could not even see my Turkish ‘trowsers’ without seeing lubriciousness and deviance. Only transvestite women wore trousers they thought, and that conjured up all sorts of fantasies of perverse and ambiguous pleasures in their Western minds. By the time of their Queen Victoria they had artists queueing up to paint me and my fantasy kind: Frank Dicksee and his Laila, Frederick Lord Leighton, although the French were worse: Ingres and Gérôme, turning a sociable space into a scene of debauchery. They needed us to be luxurious and sensuous and static so that they could be dynamic and innovative and expanding. Conquering and exploiting an Other is so much easier than dealing with Same. So by deciding how to describe us, and in the process, misrepresenting us, they could dominate us, restructure us, exert their language over us to make us docile, pliable and in need of their help, which came at a price.

This is all very well. We have read our Edward Said. What has this got to do with us in the twenty-first century in our global organizations where we are all multicultural and respecters, even seekers, of diversity? You are a relic of a bygone age. You have little to tell us in our age of efficiency and rationality.

Well, I am not so sure that what I represent is so foreign, if you will excuse the pun. I think you can learn a great deal from me, and what I represent. The concept that I have learned to live with. Fitna means chaos or social disorder, something I know that is associated with the Orientalist world. But it also means ‘beautiful woman’. And there you have it: woman and chaos yet again in a different guise. And, of course, women, and beautiful women in particular, are a source of chaos, in this line of thinking, because potentially they introduce that most disruptive of all forces: sexual desire for the Other’s body, rampant and uncontrollable, into even the most tranquil space. These erotics cannot be allowed to turn upside down the whole social order. Women therefore must be sequestered into spaces where we can be kept in line, and not allowed to leach out into spaces of order, continuity, stability and predictability. Is this starting to sound familiar yet? Is my argument beginning to be clear? It is not just the royal palace that has its harem. Big
organizations have them too. *Fitna* is a menace to be controlled everywhere. So it is excluded from all those spaces that are so important to keep the world steady: the boardroom, the strategy meeting, the Cabinet, the Law Courts. Where women are let in, they have to expunge their *fitna* as the price of entrance. Men must not be distracted in the office anymore than mine must be distracted in the home or on the street. ‘A woman is always trespassing in a male space because she is, by definition, a foe. A woman has no right to use male spaces. If she enters them, she is upsetting the male’s order and his peace of mind. She is actually committing an act of aggression against him merely by being present where she should not be’. That is worth thinking about in a post-feminist landscape. Organizations are arenas for men to be men, for male violence, symbolic or otherwise. What shall the women do other than hold the coats and roll the bandages?
The Woman in White (Figure 5)

Well, look at me, sitting here in my period drama splendour. I am, I know, a work of art. A great deal of trouble goes into the making of simplicity, and I am it. Pure, simple, virtuous, chaste and enclosed. No-one can see it, which is part of its genius, but I am well and truly enclosed in a corset of steel and linen made for me by a man and then conveniently covered over in silk crepe and lace. All the manufacture of me erased. I was dead long before Judith Butler ever drew breath, but here I am wraith-like to tell the world, that I am the ultimate performance, and the ultimate drag. We have heard from my colour-saturated companions, but I am the perfection of white, the living embodiment of chromophobia.

It’s never simple, though, is it? Whitewash always threatens to conceal something nasty. Whitened sepulchres. According to Saint Matthew and Jesus Christ, we should beware of the hypocrites and Pharisees with their beautiful shining exteriors and their interiors of bones and uncleanliness. Women, of course, have always been like that. I remember very clearly the day my husband, something of an ecclesiastical scholar, burst in with his latest passage from
the Church fathers. ‘Roger de Caen’, he announced, ‘he had it right, my dear, he understood the temptations of the flesh. Listen to this and see if you do not agree that he has it, he has it.’ And then he read the passage that he loved so much and repeated so often over the miserable years of our marriage, that I still have it by heart, ‘If her bowels and flesh were cut open, you would see what filth is covered by her white skin. If a fine crimson cloth covered a pile of foul dung would anyone be foolish enough to love the dung because of it? ... There is no plague which monks should dread more that the woman: the soul’s death’.11 And he sank back triumphantly into his chair, fully expecting me to applaud this deep, wounding insult on me and all my sex.

My white skin concealing filth? And yet, white is the colour I aspire to and invested a great deal of my time on, with the lemon juice and almond pastes and buttermilk and benzoin. Bleaching and bleaching away. And him in his crow black frockcoat and mauve cravat. Looking back on it now, our lives were in some ways a battleground over colour. He once caught me at my toilette with a rouge pot. My lady’s maid had also made me a little unguent with soot, I think, for my eyebrows. He was beside himself with rage. My false face, he called it. How could he trust anyone who painted over what God had freely given? I was duplicitous and wanton. His faith in me was shattered. And so it wore on. Me, pristine and polished, virtuous, with all my colour discharged. Him, as black as night in his respectability.

It appear that I do not have anything to teach. Colour is everywhere in the modern world. But I would suggest that chromophobia is alive and well in the grandest institutions and most prestigious enterprises.12 Take the colour red, for example. Your horror of being in the red. Or imagine adding a little colour to the annual report to your investors. Colour contaminates and corrupts. It represents the foreign body. The market might tolerate a colourful Chief Executive, I suppose, but not if he brought with him a colourful investment strategy. Colour is dangerous or trivial or both. If I described a firm’s attitude to risk or to Corporate Social Responsibility as colourful, I would be verging on the libellous and I might be invited to settle the matter in court.

The aesthetic of organizations is either black or colourless or shiny and reflective. Men dress in black and grey and navy and so do their organizations. For leaders, like my husband to feel secure, they seek to expunge qualities such as the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the queer or the pathological, the Other. And the discourse of lean production and processes would further expunge the inessential and the supplementary. The notion of the cosmetic, is equally antithetical to companies claiming ethical policies and value for money: what you see must be what you get. I believe there is a phrase: we shall not be putting lipstick on the camel. All this suggests to me that there is no room in organization for the colourful, for the Other.

Letting colour into organizations means letting the feminine in with it and therefore inviting in ruination and chaos. Colourful women will steal livelihoods and souls. There can be no place for scarlet women in the straight lines and black colourations of organizations, there would need to be care taken to exclude them and their soul-destroying ways. Colour, like women, must be contained and subordinated, right down to the specified pantone reference number of your official logos.

A little etymology, perhaps. ‘Colour’, the charming companion of my bosom used to tell me, comes from the Latin colorrem, related to celare — to hide or conceal. In Middle English, he went on, to colour meant to adorn, embellish, disguise, render specious or plausible, to misrepresent. This is anathema to organizations priding themselves on probity and transparency and ethical dealing in general. Not only might women wear colourful clothes and break up the seamless black, charcoal grey and dark navy, they might also wear cosmetics, presenting a second face, essentially duplicitous, and, once more, disruptive of the male order of rationality.
My husband also had a penchant for Goethe, not the Romantic Sorrows of the Young Werther, but the dull and abstract treatise on colour: ‘it is also worthy of remark, that savage nations, uneducated people, and children have a great predilection for vivid colours; the animals are excited to rage by certain colours; that people of refinement avoid vivid colours in their dress and the objects that are about them, and seem inclined to banish them altogether from their presence’. Only black will do, though, really, because I just cannot be trusted in my whitened sepulchre of a dress, concealing all those exquisite pink areas that might reintroduce chaos into the world.

Reflections

The dolls, as I have stated, are a projection of my own embodied knowledge about how it feels to work in gendered organizations. They function as a form of ventriloquist’s dummy, allowing me to say things directly that I would normally have to hedge about with a great deal of theory, which, I contend, would bleach the emotion out of the accounts. Although the dolls are problematic in their non-reproducibility except through the flattening abstraction of the photograph, they are an appeal to the senses and an invitation to engage with organization studies in a sensory way.

This piece of art as research has produced two feminine texts: the dolls and the fictional accounts of lives associated with them. I have discussed the dolls above, but have paid less attention to the fictional texts placed into their mouths.

There is a political element to presenting fiction which links it to the feminist project of uncovering and challenging everyday oppressions and limiting assumptions. ‘Blurring the boundaries between social sciences and humanities’ (Bochner and Ellis, 1998, p. 7) represents one strategy in a move to challenge the ‘the traditional polarization of the literary and the scientific’ (Bochner and Ellis, 1998, p. 7). I do not claim that conventional scientific writing with its emphasis on logic, evidence, argument, validity and so on is masculine, but it is certainly monolithic, and expunges other ways of truth telling from academic production. Advocates of experimental writing, often including fiction, such as Ellis (2000), Frank (2000), Richardson (2000), Sparkes (1997, 2002) and Watson (1995), generally argue that it brings an immediacy and vividness to the writing which engages the reader and allows them to see the phenomenon under consideration in a much deeper and richer way through the engagement of the imagination. Tillmann-Healy, for example, describes the narrative ethnography she produces as ‘thick scenic description, reconstructed dialogue, dramatic tension and temporal shifts’ (2002, p. 339) crafted to produce an affect in the reader. The key point in these writers’ claims is that they are not trying to mirror the world exactly because that is impossible; instead, they construct a truthful representation or evocation of reality from within our own culture. Clough, for example, challenges the notion of scientific objectivity in any form of research:

For, despite the sterility of instruments, we never come innocent to a research task, or a situation of events; rather we situate these events not merely in institutional meanings which our profession provides, but also constitute them as expressions of ourselves. (Clough, 2002: 17)

These texts, through their evocative and affective power, are designed to bring about change and action. Tillmann-Healy again writes:

There are many interpretations to a good story, and it isn’t a question of which one is right or wrong but of what you do with what you’ve read ... Ideally, by interacting with the work, readers find something to take in and use, both for themselves and for social change. (2002, pp. 340 and 343)
Sandelowski gives a tour de force defence of writing fiction as a means of producing a truthful text:

When you talk to me about my research, do not ask me what I found; I found nothing. Ask me what I invented, what I made up from and out of my data. But know that in asking you to ask me this, I am not confessing to telling any lies about the people or events in my studies/stories. I have told the truth. The proof is in the things that I have made — how they look to your mind’s eye, whether they satisfy your sense of style and craftsmanship, whether you believe them, and whether they appeal to your heart. (1994, p. 121)

Writing in this way has its dangers, and although making it up appears easier than doing conventional social science research, paradoxically it can make for a harder life. Laurel Richardson, one of the most established writers of creative and alternative social science texts, writes:

The opportunities for writing worthy texts — books and articles that are a ‘good read’ are multiple, exciting and demanding. But the work is harder and the guarantees are fewer. There is a lot more for us to think about. (Richardson, 1994, p. 523)

Producing written text, incidentally, is still considerably less risky than producing speaking rag dolls.

The texts allow me to produce what Conquergood (1985) and Spry (2011), to name only two scholars, describe as ‘performative’ text: text which engages on a variety of levels other than simply the intellectual one and which encourages an emotional, embodied response. I am aware that the question ‘so what?’ can be raised. And my point is that using these sorts of methods allows people like me, who have been professional academics writing largely in professional, sanctioned voices for many years, to give testimony, to bear witness to the empirical knowing that they have gained along the way. I am reminded of Pat Yancey Martin’s (2002) remarkable paper about her life’s work in old people’s residential homes which was sociologically rigorous and highly respected, but which omitted to mention the very thing which was central to all the organizing in the institutions she visited: managing the smell. She writes in that article that smell was not considered a proper subject for academic work and yet it represented her embodied experience every time she engaged in her fieldwork, but that experience did not count and could not be included in legitimate academic production.

The substantive part of this paper has been to explore the lived experience of women in organizations through one case study: my own. I have sought to make it vivid and memorable by presenting it through fictional things: confected dolls with imagined stories, with a view to making readers see organizational life for women slightly differently. It is my own contention that women do not fit in organizations, when the latter are constituted arenas for male competition and micro aggression, any better than they fit the protection required to conquer in those arenas — the body armour refashioned as the business suit. It is my own contention that organizations are chromophobic, committed to neutrals increasingly unenlivened by personal artefacts in the pursuit of clear and hot desk efficiency. It is my own contention that women are still seen as disruptive in organizations because of their Otherness expressed through clothes, make-up, perfume and deportment. And I have sought to express these in a way that engages rather than confronts, in itself, possibly a feminine tactic. As Joyce Fletcher (2002, 2004) notes, the oppressed can only ever drop hints to the oppressor.

Our own experience as we move through our research terrains is still often discounted: if it cannot be measured it does not count. I have spent considerable time, effort and emotion in recent years attempting to write differently and to research differently in a more immediate and embodied way. While I have had some champions, I echo Peter Clough’s sentiments that postmodern research and new ways of writing need ‘not so much to be talked about critically and
retrospectively, as to be exemplified’ (Clough, 2002, p. 5). In this paper I have attempted to provide a case study of presenting and representing research differently rather than seeking to justify it or interrogate it any more than was necessary to secure publication. I hope that it will give others ideas and possibly courage to do something differently. I hope it demonstrates a feminine writing which lays bare its process, faulty and messy as it is. I hope it provides insight into some of the organizational phenomena which still remain obscure in so much of organization studies. I hope it has provided food for thought. My revolutionary aims are quite modest, but they are revolutionary.

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Notes

1. The Borrowers is a children’s novel by Mary Norton in which a tiny family lived in the skirting board of a family house and ‘borrow’ objects to furnish their own home. See Norton (1940).
2. This passage draws heavily on the work of Anne Hollander (1994).
8. The discussion of fitna comes from Mernissi (1985 [1975]).
12. This passage draws heavily on Batchelor (2000).

References


