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# Precarious masculinities and gender as pedagogy: aesthetic advice-encounters for the Dutch urban economy

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## ABSTRACT

In the context of precarious post-Fordist urban labour markets, Dress for Success in the Netherlands, a non-profit working in the context of the welfare state, provides dress advice to a majority of men. Dress advice consists of moments in which demands for immaterial labour find material translations into items of clothing. Building on ethnographic observations, I argue that dress advice-encounters should be seen as exercises in adaptability to new and ever changing economic circumstances. In these pedagogies, gender is a key instrument. Rather than a straightforward feminization of the economy, what is at stake is a performance of openness towards becoming adaptable to future labour market demands. Asking men to depart their attachments to Fordist working class masculinities and its material translations is an exercise toward becoming pliable enough for post-Fordist precarious labour markets.

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## Introduction

‘You are not used to this, are you?’ asks Johan. Sander responds shyly: ‘Whenever I need something new to wear, I always bring a woman friend or something and then I say: ‘I’ll just go into the fitting room right away, I’ll see whatever it is you bring me there.’

Sander needs a job. He is in his mid-thirties and has been unemployed for more than five years now, unable to find paid employment regardless of his ICT skills and credentials. He is optimistic, though, because he has been invited for a job interview. He has come to Johan and Dress for Success Rotterdam (the Netherlands) for advice and an outfit free of charge. Dress for Success Rotterdam (DfS) is like a small boutique; there are racks of

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fashionable jackets and dresses, mannequins, mirrors. The concept is as simple as it is sympathetic: when a welfare client or otherwise unemployed person has an invitation for a job interview but no resources to buy an appropriate outfit, DfS provides advice and, if available, an outfit (see below for a more extensive explanation of DfS and their practices). Dress for Success is originally an American concept (Cummins and Blum 2015), now operating locally in the Dutch context as a non-profit with city subsidies.

In the spring of 2016, I did an ethnographic case-study of the dress advice provided there. I observed meetings with clients and volunteers managing the store. I was interested in what I call dress *advice-encounters* for urban precarious labour markets. Based on literature outlining how in post-Fordism, employers demand certain aesthetic performances (Adkins and Lury 1999; Elias et al. 2017; McDowell 2009; Wolkowitz 2006), I was interested in pedagogical encounters that were focused, precisely, on teaching (prospective) workers how to perform such labour. In an urban service economy that demanded bodies to look, sound and move in a certain way, I wanted to know how pedagogical encounters to change these bodies take shape. In the DfS case, this was an especially poignant question to ask since even the most superficial aspects of the demanded aesthetic labour – putting on a jacket, a dress or leather shoes – were unattainable for clients because of financial constraints. DfS's goal is, however, to achieve such a different appearance, posture and feeling (about oneself, the job or life in general) by advising clients how to dress. The aim of this article is to investigate the role gender performances played in this transformation and to show that changing certain aspects of the gendered performances of clients was a way of achieving a general adaptability in the client deemed necessary for contemporary labour markets. The goal of the transactions was to arrive at a performance of the 'ideal subject of the employment contract' that 'can adapt his or her self-identity to a changing environment' (Adkins and Lury 1999: 601). Far from a straightforward civilizing offensive or form of class discipline then (although aspects of this could be found too), the objective was to achieve an openness to change and the ability to adapt to change. In this project, gender became pedagogy.

What struck me early on was that I almost only encountered male clients. I am not sure why exactly I had not anticipated this. The boutique, at any rate, gave no impression of this particular gendered focus. More than half of the store was taken up by women's clothing and accessories. These racks were the most colourful, the most decorative. Most of the clothing that was donated (DfS's services rely on donations) was women's clothing and therefore most of the discussions among the volunteers were about women's items: sifting through and assessing sacks of clothing that were donated was one of the most time-consuming activities for staff. A couple of weeks into my ethnography, though, I had not seen a single advice-encounter with a

female client. This experience is reflected in DfS's own statistics: roughly two thirds of its clients are, in fact, men. Beyond this particular sex-ratio, though, gender dynamics in the advice-encounters I observed were hard to miss. Men usually displayed a definite reluctance when entering the boutique. When inside, they were often visibly and openly uncomfortable with receiving dress advice, trying clothes on or even talking about dressing for work at all. The volunteers, on the other hand, were almost all women and offered a warm and empathetic welcome while establishing a position of aesthetic expertise.

In this article, I investigate these displays of reluctance and uneasiness as performative masculinities that are problematized as not aligning with contemporary urban labour market demands. These uncertain masculinities were, importantly, not primarily understood as problematic by me or even by DfS's volunteer staff. Rather, men themselves came into the store hoping to learn aesthetic skills. In addition, they were often referred to DfS by welfare agents that convinced them of the problem of their look and attitude.

## **(Post) Fordist masculinities and aesthetics for labour**

### *Precarious labour and leftover clothes*

The majority of workers in contemporary urban labour markets work in (interactive) service sector jobs, many of which are precarious (McDowell 2009). This constitutes quite fundamental changes in what is required of workers when compared to unionized industrial jobs in Fordism, for example with regards to the security employment offers. Increasingly, work's rewards are unable to support life, leaving many workers vulnerable and precarious (Lorey 2015). Post-Fordism implicates rearrangements of social life, the economization of 'the private' and a precarization that is becoming normalized (Lorey 2015). This article aims to contribute to rethinking these rearrangements as it focuses on expectations regarding performances of masculinity for work and the transitions in gender performances that accompany economic changes in especially urban areas.

Part of the precarization of work is that it mobilizes workers' affects and socialities, rendering a separation between work and private life increasingly difficult. Stewardesses sell their smile (Hochschild 1983), child-minders their love, party planners their passion (McRobbie 2016). As part of these mobilizations of affect, aesthetics are often considered critical in labour market exchanges (Adkins and Lury 1999). Post-Fordist labour has also been conceptualized as 'immaterial labour'. For Maurizio Lazzarato (1996), immaterial labour is 'the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity' (133). Private tastes and fashions, therefore, are increasingly a crucial part of the labour offered. Working in a coffee shop today is as

much about wearing the right clothes and using the right expressions as it is about making coffee (which is itself, too, dependent on fashions). Immaterial labour, thus, always translates to particular material practices such as dressing and it is these practices that are of interest here.

To be more specific: this article focuses on *aesthetic pedagogies* and on particular encounters in Dress for Success in which (potential) workers in urban labour markets are taught how to perform this mundane practice. Rather than looking at the importance of aesthetics for contemporary labour in general, it looks at a moment in which the aim is to *teach* how to perform the backstage labour that goes into presenting a working self. The pedagogy entails the training of the ability to perform what I term *dress work*: the backstage labour of dressing the body for work. Focusing on the materiality of clothing enables us to look for ways in which immaterial labour becomes, indeed, material.

It also provides an opportunity to look for a very concrete way in which Fordism appears to have an 'afterlife' (Muehlebach 2011): the aesthetics of Fordism have not exactly disappeared as much as the scholarly talk about the Fordism/post-Fordism transition would predict (compare McDowell 2009 for a discussion of this debate). As much as there are 'leftover feelings' (Muehlebach 2011) of Fordism, there also may be, so to speak, leftover clothes. For many jobs in post-Fordism, standardizations of the 'presentation of self' such as uniforms and formal suits are no longer suitable or possible. Instead, many engage in a continuous interpretation and calibration of the self-work relationship. Indeed, as I will go on to show below, it was the teaching of this very calibration and a performance of adaptability that was central in Dress for Success' pedagogical practice.

### *Gender in the post-Fordist urban*

Gender has been front and centre in scholarly and public debates about recent labour market changes. The economic downturn that was the result of the 2008 economic crisis, for example, has been discussed in terms of a crisis of gender. In many popular media, for example, it has been claimed that especially men suffered from recent crises and economic restructuring because the sectors that traditionally offer employment to men (the automobile industry, steel, manufacturing) were hit (van den Berg 2017). At the same time, however, the literature about precarization that I draw on for this article, argues that women have typically taken up the most precarious forms of employment and indeed, that precariousness is and historically has been an important women's issue (Lorey 2015; Tokumitsu 2015). While scholars agree that much post-Fordist service-work requires performances that are commonly thought of as feminine, such as empathy, sexiness and deference

(Adkins and Lury 1999; McDowell 2009), this in no way should be taken to mean a straightforward preference of employers for women over men (Adkins 2002), nor a simple improvement of women's economic position at the cost of (young) men (McDowell 2003).

Men are, thus, certainly not simply losing out to women. Certain *masculinities*, however, do seem to be considered problematic in the post-Fordist urban in ways that they were not before. The working class masculinities famously depicted by Paul Willis (1977) in his *Learning to labour*, were a good fit in an industrial economy where shop-floor behaviour was, in Willis' view, practiced and prepared in displays of working class masculinities in schools. Working class kids got working class jobs (the subtitle of the book), not in the least because of the particular masculinities they rehearsed (compare Bourgois 2003, for a similar argument placed in the US). Several authors have suggested that, in a time with much less unionized industrial labour, gendered expectations are shifting (Nayak 2006; McDowell 2003; 2009). Young working class men in Anoop Nayak's study (2006), for example, had to rethink what it means to become a man in the absence of manual labour jobs. The working class masculinities that he focuses on and that were typical of Willis' study therefore became displaced: they were still performed by young men, but now in the context of bars and clubs. Linda McDowell, on the other hand, conceptualizes certain masculinities as redundant (2003). In post-Fordism, she argues, there simply is not the same room for the performance of certain masculinities. The same behaviour that was thought of as typical and productive for working class men in Fordist times is now considered highly disruptive. This is true particularly in urban areas where interactive services are especially dominant, where labour markets are especially precarious and where aesthetics play a large role (van den Berg 2017).

In the advice-encounters in DfS, the relative problematisation of the gendered aesthetic performance of men was built-in: men came there for advice. Hardly a place for displays of hegemonic masculinities (cf. Connell 1995), then, this was a place for a gender dynamic that placed men in the role of unknowing subjects – a motif I will explore further below.

## Studying advice-encounters: case and approach

### *Dress for success Rotterdam, its volunteers and its clients*

Dress for Success originates in the United States (Cummins and Blum 2015). However, where in the US volunteers offer business attire to women, in the Dutch Dress for Success, both men and women are welcome. In the DfS store in which I did my research, almost all volunteers were women, with the exception of one: Johan (who was introduced above). Importantly, DfS Rotterdam does not primarily operate as a charity, although the clothing is

donated. Instead, it relies on city subsidies for the rent of the shop and the shop manager. This public funding also made it a primary partner for Rotterdam welfare offices that refer clients to DfS. DfS Rotterdam is not exactly public. It *is*, however, dependent on the Rotterdam administration and local politics and as such much more part of the welfare state than the American organization.

Rotterdam is a strategic case to research the gendered changes that are associated with the transition to post-Fordism (van den Berg 2017). Rotterdam has struggled with structural unemployment since the 1970s, but especially in the post-2008 period. Its administration in the period in which I did my research was especially harsh on welfare clients, leading welfare agents to aim to change clients' behaviours and aesthetics (van den Berg and Arts 2018). Moreover, as a former industrial city possessing a self-claimed masculine repertoire of harbour related industries, Rotterdam is a case from which we can learn lessons about the post-Fordist urban and the role of gender in it.

DfS volunteers almost all had a professional background in dressing and fashion and almost all the volunteers I worked with were white. A couple worked as image consultants and did DfS volunteer work additionally, some of the others used to work in a fashion boutique before retiring. Some, however, worked in the store while they were themselves 'between jobs' or looking to get more experience with dress advice for their own image consultancy business. A certain portion of the volunteer staff easily qualified as middle class: they owned nice homes, were able to go on several vacations a year and wore relatively expensive clothes themselves. Some, however, were having more trouble to make a living and looked at their work in DfS as a step towards a desired work-future. In short: the social difference between clients and volunteers was usually quite large, in terms of both gender and class (and to a lesser extent race, many clients were white as well) but in some cases, the situation of the volunteer and the client actually was more alike. Clients were typically dependent on welfare and looking to find entry into jobs that often would not provide any durable perspective on financial stability or even to allow them to exit welfare. Call-centre work, catering, workfare arrangements in public service: those were the typical positions available to them.

### *Ethnography – encounters – transactions*

For around four months in the spring of 2016 I spent time in the Dress for Success store in Rotterdam to do ethnographic research. I gained access simply by asking the DfS Rotterdam management if I could do research there. The DfS team was welcoming and eager to learn from my reflections on their practices which I provided in a presentation after I concluded my

research. I was always open to clients about my objectives and role and promised anonymity. Most clients asked some questions about my research to then return to the transaction they were involved in with the volunteers. While my role was to observe primarily, I became involved in transactions, too, for instance when I was asked what I thought of an outfit or what my assessment of a particular vacancy was. My opinion as a relatively young woman (I was 34 at the time) was sometimes quite explicitly requested by clients. Like in all ethnographic research, I therefore changed transactions. The advantage of this methodology is, however, to not have to rely on the accounts of what volunteers and clients did but to be able to observe transactions first hand. My interest was in the pedagogy of aesthetic labour: what was taught in a place in which advice on dress was the explicit goal? And: how exactly? For these purposes, ethnography as a collection of methods was most suited. I consistently looked at what happened in between volunteer staff and clients. My object of observation is, therefore, *transactions*.

My approach to transactions is informed by a body of work that is often referred to as “relational sociologies” (cf. Emirbayer 1997). For this paper, this means that I have recorded what happened *between* dress advisors/volunteers and clients/jobseekers in the context of the DfS store. My interest is in what happened in these advice-encounters much more than in volunteers’ or clients’ perspectives on DfS or their work. My use of the term transactions is based in the work of John Dewey and Arthur Bentley (1949) and a more recent interpretation for sociology by Mustapha Emirbayer (1997). Looking at transactions instead of at interactions emphasizes how subjects and entities change in an encounter, or how subjectivation takes place. It leaves more room for the studying of what happens between subjects while acknowledging that what does happen between them changes them. Men going to DfS to seek dress advice were very often not the same as those in an advice-encounter. This is true for every social situation, but especially for pedagogical ones because these have the very objective of changing the subjectivities of the participating actors. Employing this transactional perspective, I focus on the process of dress pedagogy, but also on what is produced in this process: the way in which elements that play a role in the transaction (mirrors, seats, volunteers, clients, dresses, jackets) form the transaction and are, however subtle, altered by it at the same time, at least for the duration of the transaction.

### **Uncertain masculinities: reluctance and uneasiness**

Kevin, a white man in his thirties, walks into the store. He wears blue jeans on white sneakers and a grey jacket. He introduces himself with an apology: he is too early, he knows. He explains: he is a fast walker and he had decided to walk here. Kevin is invited to sit down with a cup of coffee by Alice (the volunteer). While



doing so he buries his head between his arms. Alice asks him what exactly he came for, what type of interview-invitation he received. Kevin: 'I really didn't want to come here.' Alice: 'Where didn't you want to come? Here?' 'Yes, but you know, she told me it is best for me to do it anyway.' I gather from the rest he tells us that the 'she' he refers to here is his 'case manager' in the welfare office and that he has received an invitation to a job interview for the position of 'host' on the tram. Kevin: 'They want to have a look, Monday, how you react to different types of situations. It's going to take all day.' He also tells us how he used to not live in Rotterdam and where he lived before, there was an XTC drug lab next door and at some point there was a flood and most of his belongings and his house were damaged by the water and the chemicals in it. This is why he has no suitable clothing and why the welfare agent decided to refer him to DfS. He thinks dressing is difficult, he says. 'I usually just pick out the dark stuff. That is easiest.'

Kevin is reluctant to fully engage: he does not want to be there and sits right next to the door as if to communicate that he is ready to leave again. He does stay, however, and Alice is successful in not only dressing him, but also making him pleased with his look. Kevin's introduction of himself shows his precariousness: he has moved from dead-end job to dead-end job and housing has been a source of tremendous stress. Welfare has become more unstable too in the Netherlands; contemporary activation/workfare programs in Rotterdam are increasingly conditional (Arts forthcoming; van den Berg and Arts 2018). These insecurities are reflected in Kevin's embodied uncertainty: the submissiveness with which he sits at the table, the way in which he is getting ready to leave a situation he only just entered, the anxiousness with which he talks about the opportunity offered to him to become tram-host.

Tram-hosts wear uniforms. DfS, therefore, is primarily teaching him how to dress for the job-interview and assessments, not for the job itself. This job will not let Kevin escape his precariousness but will be one more position in a long series of such positions in which he has to adapt. DfS engages in teaching not just to dress for a particular job, but to show a general adaptability to future opportunities (I will return to this motif below). The position of tram-host is with the privatized transportation company (although tram-hosting is contracted out to a private security company) and applicants are typically recruited from the large population of welfare clients. The jobs are typically only 20–30 hours a week and modestly paid. They therefore only marginally and temporarily provide an exit from welfare and precarity. Importantly, though, the job also requires a rather ambivalent gender performance. Public transport in Rotterdam employs hosts to check tickets, to help elderly find a seat, to help travellers with baby carriages and wheel chairs and to provide a general sense of safety. On the one hand, the position therefore requires rather traditional performances of masculinity: displays of physical strength and dominance. On the other hand, the position is one in hospitality: tram-hosts are required to make travellers feel not only

safe, but welcome and at home, too; job advertisements for this post ask for the ability to 'create a warm welcome' and 'friendly' and 'social' personalities (as advertised: Securitas 2017). This, like jobs in call-centres, service desks or with caterers, is a typical job of the urban precarious labour market in which workfare programs play an important role. The fact that these jobs are in the interactive services also means that the gender performance required is both less clear and very different from the gender performances required in the previous, Fordist Rotterdam economy, in which unionized harbour-related industries dominated. Kevin therefore has to adapt his gender performance to the labour market, like the men in the Nayak's (2006) and McDowell's (2003) studies. This ambivalence is reflected in the rest of the transaction into which Alice and Kevin enter:

The welfare agent had mentioned to Kevin that he shouldn't dress too formally 'not, like, a suit or something', Kevin says. Alice: 'But: it *is* in security, in the end. What do you want to communicate there? Why don't we start with a jacket? That exudes the strength you are looking for, right? You want strength, I think?' Kevin doesn't respond. After trying on several options, Alice settles on a dark grey jacket on brown slacks (although she is not exactly happy with the colour combination) and a light-blue shirt. The issue then becomes what to wear under the shirt and what to do with regards to shoes. 'In the end', she says, 'You have to feel right in it, you know?' Alice offers Kevin the advice to wear brown shoes. 'They shouldn't be any other colour than the pants in this case. There shouldn't be too much going on in an outfit.' He also should make sure to wear something underneath the shirt, but not show it: showing a white t-shirt is not nice-looking, Alice says.

On the one hand, Alice interprets the job-interview to demand an appearance of strength and a typically masculine performance: this translates in the advice to wear a grey jacket. On the other hand, the great attention to detail (What colours 'go' together? Should he wear a t-shirt under a shirt? What colour shoes?) that Alice asks Kevin to engage in is far less traditionally masculine, at least for Kevin. Alice's job here is to engage Kevin in a gendered performance that is more ambiguous than what he is used to and precisely a performance of openness toward this ambivalence is rewarded: Alice is satisfied and Kevin can take the outfit home. I propose to understand this transaction as an exercise towards a general adaptability: the position as tram-host will probably not offer long term financial security and it is likely that Kevin will have to adapt to a range of other jobs, employers, colleagues and welfare 'case managers'. In those future jobs, he will each time have to mobilize a set of different affects that are a fit for that situation. The exercise that Alice asks him to engage in is successful exactly when Kevin displays enough openness toward a different gender performance, enough pliability to indicate a radical openness toward whatever precarious labour is offered in the future. Alice and Kevin are preparing for a contingency that is clearly gendered in the sense that having to adapt to continuous new roles and

jobs has historically been women's predicament more so than men's (cf. Adkins 2016).

Moreover, part of what Alice does in this transaction is to show Kevin how what he had thought would be enough of an effort of aesthetic labour is, in fact, not. Alice shows Kevin just how much thought and care he should put into 'looking right' for this job. The very specific advice offered by Alice further strengthens the divide between Alice and Kevin. In many ways, the transactions in DfS therefore underscore class differences (this was also a finding of Cummins and Blum 2015). Transactions such as this one therefore resolve some anxieties about 'appropriate' performances while they can at the same time run the risk of underlining gendered and classed divisions and the insecurities that were the reason for coming into the store in the first place.

Much of the work of the volunteers of DfS actually consisted of putting men at ease. In many cases, I observed an almost mother-son type of interaction, or in any case highly empathetic invitations to the world of dress. Many volunteers do, in fact, have a formal or special type of knowledge or experience in the field of fashion or dressing, which enables them to successfully establish themselves as experts. In addition, in the definition of the situation, the roles of 'unknowing' and 'knowing' subject are of course partly built in (although some clients negotiate these roles quite successfully, as I will show below), leading to many transactions perhaps being 'maternalist' (Cummins and Blum 2015): displaying a hierarchical mother-child type of dynamic that reinforces difference but produces genuine care as well (*ibidem*). This may be part of why so many men displayed not only reluctance and insecurity but also much clumsiness. They often appeared to know absolutely nothing about dressing, not even their own sizes. Frequently, early on in the transaction, volunteers would enquire if the client knew his measurements and most often they did not. This led many volunteers to presume as much in following transactions and not just ask what the client's measurements were, but ask: "Do you have *any* idea what your size is? No right?" To then show that they could tell right away that he is a 'shirt-size 49' or a 'jeans-size 32'. The clumsiness was apparent sometimes in the inactivity of the clients, letting the expertise of the volunteers roll over them, so to speak. Many men uttered 'I don't know' often during transactions, hands in pockets, shrugging. Note for example this transaction between Johan, Nathalie (the volunteers) and Marc, a forty-something logistics jobseeker.

We look for a shirt, a casual shirt, because Nathalie and Johan have determined that Marc doesn't need formal attire. Almost all the shirts that Nathalie picks are button-down and I ask her what exactly makes button-down shirts more casual. She notes how these little buttons on the collar makes them stay in place and many of the 'gentlemen' (*heren*) don't notice when their collar is not in place. 'They don't pay attention to these things'. A selection of shirts ends up on the rack for Marc to pick from. Johan asks Marc: 'What is *you*? Shirt-wise?' Marc picks a blue

and pink checked shirt. Johan: 'Oh, I wouldn't have expected that at all!' Marc: 'Why not?' Johan: 'Very well, very well, go put this on.' After the assessment of this shirt, Johan and Nathalie engage in a negotiation about other things and Marc has to wait in front of the dressing room in his new shirt and pants. He wants to bend over and lean on the cabinets that are in front of him, but he hasn't noticed that they stand on wheels. The cabinets shift, Marc nearly falls over, but rescues himself and puts the cabinets in place again.

In trying to find a posture that makes him feel less uncomfortable in this transaction that largely excludes him though it is about him, Marc causes more embarrassment: he nearly falls. I am not entirely sure why Marc wanted to lean on the cabinets (I was not able to ask him). However, these field notes do show some of the power balance that was typical of advice-encounters and some of the clumsiness and insecurity displayed by male clients there.

Some men were more successful in asserting themselves as 'knowing subjects', in dressing or some other field.

Marco, a forty-something man shows Lisa and Mary the invitation to an interview for the position of account manager. He, too, starts with an apology – the invitation is on Whatsapp. He asks if that is ok too. He is tall and broad-shouldered. He wears an old, too small and washed out Armani t-shirt with a grey cardigan. He is optimistic: this is a great job. They will pay for a phone, a car: great! Lisa asks about what he would do, exactly. He takes back his comments: 'Yeah sure, I have a car and phone myself, I don't mean that that's why I would want this job. I'm not applying for that. But still, it's nice, that the company would offer that.' He thinks this job would be perfect for him, he has the skills for a sales position. 'I can sell. Absolutely.' Lisa asks him what he would like to wear for the interview. He says he would like to wear a three piece suit. Lisa asks what three-piece means to him: a jacket with pants or also a vest? The latter, Marco says. 'But I'm definitely open to tips from you'. Lisa shares some of her expertise: about colours, sizes. Black and white, she says, would probably be too formal and therefore 'not ideal'. After Lisa and Mary have picked out several suits and shirts and when Marco is front of a mirror in one of them he explains that he feels he is too heavy now. He has done combat sports all his life and is training now to lose six to eight kilos. At which point he will, he promises, fit into this suit. He explains at length that he knows exactly how to lose weight: he has helped many, he claims, in losing theirs at the gym. Marco likes doing things for other people, likes helping people. (Lisa: 'of course, it's always nice to help people, right?') Because, he explains: most people make crucial mistakes when trying to lose weight.

Marco here offers a counterpoint to his perceived lack of expertise and knowledge when it comes to dressing and his lack of status as being unemployed by stressing his expertise in combat sports and with regards to weight issues. He is embarrassed by being out of paid employment. Lisa has presented herself in their first transaction as an expert in the field of dressing, as a knowing subject, laying out expert knowledge, general 'rules' of dressing for work to Marco. By asking him what a three piece suit means for him, she underscores his role as the one lacking the expertise in this

transaction: Lisa uncovers how he is not sure, exactly, what he means when he asks for a three-piece. Marco, like many other men I encountered in the store, was quick to establish himself as an expert in a different field than dressing. He acknowledges Lisa's expertise ('I'm open to tips') but is set on creating a more equal transaction. Sometimes men stressed how they used to work in a certain industry, how they set out to study this or that when they were younger, what type of public role they have or what their ambitions were. Marco's was an ambivalent claim, though, because it also further highlighted something else he was embarrassed about: his weight.

The suit that Marco likes best, a fashionable, new, brand-name suit in a subtle blue-grey stripe, is a little tight around his shoulders. The suit is not available in other sizes. On the advice of Lisa, he agrees to try on a larger, but far less nice suit. This one fits better, he agrees, and it goes together nicely with a shirt that Marco picked out for its nice blue colour. But he likes the newer, brand-name suit better. He asks if it is ok if he tries that on one more time. Lisa nods and shrugs. Marco offers how he is sure that he will be able to lose around 6 kilos in a week, just in time to fit the suit. He is able to convince Lisa when he argues that the shoes he likes best – red leather – go best with the suit he wants. Marco feels they make him look really creative. Lisa agrees: they are a statement. And yes: she has to agree that, indeed, they look better with this suit and Marco's outfit-pick looks like it just came out of the store. Marco walks up and down to the mirror and snaps his fingers a couple of times: 'Yes, this is it. It's obvious.' He is going to lose weight anyway, he says. 'You know, the suit can't be any bigger, but I can be smaller!' Lisa smiles and says: 'you're right; you can really see what a good outfit can do for you, right?'

Marco's way of commenting on this body is one of a paradoxical mix of insecurity and bragging: he is uncertain and embarrassed about his weight. At the same time, though, he is proud of his ability to adapt his body to a potential new labour market position. This is the field in which he establishes, in the end, his dominance in this transaction: he successfully claims he can adapt his body to the suit and to the requirements of his new job. On the one hand Marco is performing a hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995): he is asserting a particular type of dominance, one based on strength and knowledge. On the other hand, he is open to accepting Lisa's expertise and placing certain parts of his masculinity in the gym, much like some of the men in Nayak's (2006) study displaced certain masculinities to bars and clubs. This adaptability, I will now go on to argue, is precisely what was central in the transactions I witnessed and the pedagogy of DfS. Indeed, my interpretation of this transaction is that it is precisely Marco's argument of his body's adaptability that helps convince Lisa to temporarily open her position of the expert up for negotiation.

### **Gendered aesthetic pedagogies: adaptability and futurity**

Beyond the performance of expertise, reluctance and uncertainty, what was practiced and rehearsed in the transactions that I studied was, a performance

of adaptability: showing that you are able to reinvent yourself in the future for new jobs and positions. As already indicated in the analysis of the transactions between Alice and Kevin above, the goal of many DfS transactions was to arrive at the openness to adapt the self to a new job (and series of future jobs after that) while at the same time retaining a sense of authenticity and a most private, unique self. In part, the pedagogy of DfS consisted in part of an invitation to their clients to let go of their 'usual look'. After all, they came to DfS more often than not looking to change this very appearance. At the same time, though, they were also invited to select clothing that reflected them and represented who they were. In the above example of Marc, for instance, Johan asks Marc to pick a shirt from a selection which he feels is really 'him'. This, I argue, is a temporary fixation of a self amid a general fluidity that is focused on the future: a fluidity that is highly gendered.

In this practice of fluidity and adaptability, material objects in the DfS store played an important role: racks, cabinets, hangers, changing rooms, ties, shirts and mirrors. For my purposes here I will go into two. First and most obviously: the clothing itself was crucial in transactions of transformation. Volunteers would ask clients to try something on 'just to try and see what it is like'. They would also always stress that it would be ok if they did not like the outfit, in the end. Here it is crucial to focus on the transaction and what was *practiced* in it: regardless of whether a green-blue striped tie would, in fact, be what the client would leave the store with, the point is that he would engage in the practice of trying it on, seeing what a) he would be like with it and b) if that object could potentially become 'really him'. Volunteers, after all, would stress that the DfS advice should not result in 'playing dress up' as that would always result not only in an experienced discomfort on the part of the client, but also in 'sending the wrong message' to potential employers. It was, thus, key that a balance would be struck between adaptation and authenticity. Importantly therefore, in this second move, clients were invited to experiment with certain *potentialities*; they were asked to think of potential selves in the future. Their (past) experiences and skills were of less importance than the practice of an open future in which new selves would emerge, pointing to a shift from what Lisa Adkins (2008) calls retroactivation (the activation in labour of past embodied experience) to futurity and speculation. This helps explain, for example, why quite so many outfits would be tried on. Even when both the client and the volunteer would be happy with an assembled outfit, they would often continue in a search for more potential selves: more colour combinations, ties, and jackets.

The second material object that was of great importance in this practice was the mirror. To arrive at a practice of adaptability and futurity, a practice

of reflection was crucial. Mirrors offered the literal reflection that was used to this end. Advisors would ask clients (if they did not do this themselves already) to come up to the mirror and look at themselves from different angles. They never asked clients to do this with their own clothing that they wore when entering the store. It was only after the first transformation, when a potential future self had surfaced, that they invited clients to participate in this exercise. There were several mirrors available, but the one used for these purposes was almost always the one in the middle of the store so that the advisors and clients could look into it together. In some cases, the client would himself claim to see 'a totally different person', but in many cases, the volunteer staff would exclaim the appearance of someone new. Akin to the logic of make-over television (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008; McRobbie 2004), therefore, the implicit message here is that the 'old self' did not suffice and that a transformation was necessary – a message that was frequently agreed upon by the clients themselves. Crucially however, other than in many make-over shows, the point was not only to arrive at a new self (more middle class, more sophisticated, as is the goal of the symbolic violence apparent there, (McRobbie 2004)). That was definitely also a goal, but the point was also to experiment with multiple future selves: to arrive at a performance of 'flexible corporeality' (Adkins and Lury 1999: 607)

One of the ways in which this became especially apparent was when clients came back after their job interview to report the good news that they were hired, because in such a case, DfS offers a second outfit: one that is not primarily for an interview, but more appropriate for the day-to-day (often more informal) dressing for work. Almost always, in this second advice-encounter, clients were advised to watch their co-workers closely in their first days on the job to make sure they could assess what would be appropriate for that particular work setting. Again: what clients engage in here is not only the assemblage of an outfit, but an exercise to prepare them for the continuing calibration of self and contingent work-environments through dress work. They are asked to perform a certain pliability and fluidity: enough to make sure they land jobs again and again in the precarious economy. However, there was always also the acknowledgement that the transformation should not be total. Consider, for example, this piece of fieldwork data about a transaction with Lee.

'I'm ready to do anything', Lee says. Lee has been unemployed now for three years and comes to DfS with a referral of his welfare agent. He has worked for over 35 years and is very sad about being out of work now. It is hard to find a job at his age, he says, 'Who will hire someone that is fifty-plus?' His first job, 35 years ago, was in the Rotterdam port: carrying, truck driving, handling cargo. After several jobs he got a position in the storage room of a stationary store: he was what he calls 'all-round employee'. He worked there for 25 years, right until the store went bankrupt. The owner of the store tried to make it work online, Johan explains, but

to no avail. Lee would like a 'neat' (*netjes*) outfit. He explains to Johan and Nathalie that a jacket would be nice. Initially, both try to convince him of a more 'casual' look. They ask for his measurements. Lee, unlike many other men in the store, does know his sizes but Johan and Nathalie explain that they are cause for concern: there are not enough items in the store in these sizes to have options. Jackets, Johan explains, are usually too long for someone Lee's size.

Nonetheless, Johan starts collecting items in the store. He starts with jackets (this is where the process usually starts). The ones that Johan marks as 'boring' are what Lee says to like: grey or blue would be great, he says. A jacket would be a real addition to his wardrobe he says, one that is not easily affordable for him.

When Lee comes out of the fitting room with his first jacket on, Johan exclaims: 'Look, look, look, this is becoming interesting!' In front of the mirror Nathalie agrees: 'Well, this is just a very different gentleman!' Lee: 'Yes, yes, I think so too. It is casual and neat at the same time.' Johan and Nathalie, however, are not ready to conclude anything. They ask Lee to try on several other outfits, shirts, jackets. Johan's point, he explains, is *to show just what variations are possible*. Especially pants that will go with several other garments are good for this purpose, since Johan says how he expects Lee to have to go on several job interviews with different employers in the future.

After trying on several options, Lee returns to the first jacket about which he had said he liked it right away. He is charmed by it, but it's too small, so tight even that he is unable to close the buttons. But the sleeves are the right length and it doesn't look like Lee is drowning in it, because it is not too long for his torso, like all the other options. In the end, Johan and Nathalie concede: 'A jacket that is too tight is better than a jacket that is much too long. That would look like you borrowed the jacket: so shabby (*armoedig*)'. Lee comments that perhaps, once he starts working, his stomach will become slimmer too: the jacket will fit then. Nathalie looks at me as she comments: 'Well, that may be a nice incentive then, right? And it is true, you know, working usually makes you skinnier.' When Lee is getting ready to leave I comment that he looks sharp in his new outfit. Lee responds: 'I know, well I am sharp. For real. I wake up early in the morning, I go outside, I am sharp.'

The mirror serves an important purpose here: it offers the material reflection that helps to engage Lee in this exercise as it offers the confirmation for Lee that the jacket he chose, does, in fact make him look like a proper job applicant. This is the balance that is of crucial importance here: Lee, like many other men in the store is uncertain about his prospects in the Rotterdam economy and uncertain about what he should do in terms of aesthetic labour to enhance his chances. Perhaps cruelly, Johan assumes in the above transaction that the job interview Lee is going on and for which he needs the outfit is not going to be his last – Johan and Nathalie teach him that future variations and future adaptability will be necessary to prepare for contingency.

Lee's story can serve as a metaphor for the de-industrializing Rotterdam urban economy (van den Berg 2017): he started as a young man in the



harbour and was employed in several manual jobs since. He used to be the breadwinner in the family and losing his job to webstores has been traumatizing. He is eager ('I am sharp!') to reposition himself as this breadwinner and this finds its translation in his preference for a grey jacket: a classic masculine work item. Lee, in a way, desires a return to a performance of Fordist masculinity: being a breadwinner again, including the sartorial items that symbolize that role. In the contemporary Rotterdam economy, however, the stability that Fordism typically offered working class men is no longer available and the symbols accompanying those role are dismantled (compare McRobbie 2016; Adkins 2016). Just picking out a grey jacket is not really an option for Lee in the DfS encounter, therefore: Johan and Nathalie have a different plan, one that involves showing Lee variations, potentialities, options. The transaction that ensues is an exercise in adapting to post-Fordism and an engagement in dressing that Lee, like most of the other men, is not comfortable in. He is asked to question and depart his attachment to Fordism and perform adaptability. Like Kevin, Lee learns through a differently gendered performance of self what that fluidity could feel like and how to perform it convincingly. Lee receives a 'pedagogic invitation' (McRobbie 2016:15) to post-Fordism as he is made to leave behind his idea of dressing like a man (the formal jacket) and engaging in a transaction full of negotiations that are far more easily associated with femininity. Crucially, gender, here, becomes part of the pedagogy. In the transactions, Kevin, Lee and the other men are invited to depart their attachments to a Fordist working class masculinity that includes performances of physical strength and disinterest in aesthetics and to perform fluidity (in itself heavily gendered) and a feminized interest in clothes and appearance. It is an exercise toward becoming pliable enough for post-Fordist precarious labour markets.

## Conclusion

Becoming a tram-host or a service desk employee is entering a realm of uncertainty, especially for men that have spent their working lives in manual labour (like Lee) or that were expecting such a working life (like the younger men in this study). The uncertainty is markedly gendered: it is not only a new step in a succession of insecure labour market relations (in itself a departure from a recent history of relative job security for men when compared to women), it is also asking for a gendered performance that is new for these men. In an exercise of adaptability to new economic circumstances, gender plays an important role. Rather than a straightforward feminization of the economy, or an expectation of more feminine performance per se, what is at stake here, I argue, is a *pedagogy of adaptability which works through gender*.

This works, first, through asking the men to leave behind the material translations of Fordist masculinity. The expectation of a stable working life in manual labour is part of the 'afterlife of Fordism' (Muehlebach 2012) or part of a Fordist affect (Berlant 2011): becoming a wage-earner, for these men, is part of having a life, an expectation of normalcy. This was especially apparent in the preference for formal suits and jackets: the navy or grey suits that were preferred by male DfS clients are symbols of masculinities under Fordism. Part of the DfS encounters was to let go of these particular preferences.

Second, it works through the practice of letting go of the performance of a particular working class masculinity: the performance of a man that overtly does not care about his appearance. When Johan says to Sander 'You're not used to this, are you?' (the opening quote of this paper), the message is not just that Johan is open to helping Sander, but also that he should learn to do this himself in the future and should start to care about his appearance. Sander should see himself in the mirror wearing jackets, shirts, and more informal wear. He should be able to speculate about future potentialities: he should be able to imagine other future selves, differently gendered selves that perform immaterial labour in the post-Fordist urban economy.

Third, these practices were to arrive at a general adaptability, fluidity and pliability. The demand placed on men in DfS encounters is to be open to and ready for labour market calibrations: future job openings, employers, economic developments. To ask men to have some openness towards their gender performance, indeed, to ask men to change parts of it as a matter of exercise in the Dress for Success encounters and to, for example, not opt for the formal suit, is to ask them to have a radical openness towards becoming adaptable to whatever the labour market may need in the future. It is to ask not just eagerness, skills and availability, but also to be able to think of yourself as having both an authentic core that needs to be original and unique *and* as being fundamentally open-ended, even when it comes to an aspect of the self that many experience as natural and biological: their gender. Historically, to be unstable, flexible, fluid, pliable and re-active has often been connoted as feminine (Adkins 2002; see also for example Hass 2002 on Irigaray's work). In Dress for Success, men were asked to let go of their control, to let go of the expectation of stable employment and to be unknowing subjects taking advice, to mobilize affective attachments to certain aesthetics and to become pliable enough to calibrate the work-self relationship to ever changing labour market situations. Gender performances, here, were used as a pedagogical instrument to exercise the openness and orientation to the future that post-Fordism demands.

This does not necessarily mean a feminization. However, the pliability and adaptability that is rehearsed in the encounters I researched can be viewed

as producing a particular conformity with labour and the new urban economy that is easily connoted as feminine: moving along, being flexible, understanding unemployment as personal failure. The point is not so much to become more feminine, middle class or more successful economically per se (as is the case with makeover TV for example). No promises were made about arriving at better circumstances through the exercises at DfS. What was practiced was adaptability and mobility but, as Angela McRobbie has articulated so poignantly: “this is mobility, which does not quite know where it is going.” (McRobbie 2016: 90).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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