

# FASHIONING THE EXECUTIVE (LOOK):

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN, FASHION  
AND THE RISE OF THE NEW WORK ORDER

Submitted for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

by

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Angela Thomas-Jones  
05/06/2006

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## ABSTRACT

Fashion is not essential to completing an effective and productive day's work. Suits, shoulder pads and power dressing are images and phrases that encircle working women and are too often relegated to the empty cubicles of 1980s and 1990s history. The proliferation of internet-mediated commerce meant – in fictional narratives at least - women swapped their Claiborne for geek chic and 'up all night' hair, the preferential wear for New Economy employees.<sup>1</sup> In the 2000s, the Australian employment industry - fractured, non-standard and fluid - is promoting a new 'creative' work order. What are the consequences of this transformation of ideology and iconography for workplace dressing and the bodies of the women who wear it?

This doctoral thesis examines the relationship between fashion, clothes, women and work. The goal and methodology of this thesis is the alignment of work theory, with discourses of clothing and fashion, oral history, policy documents and popular culture. Such a research project requires interdisciplinary scholarship that activates debates about women's bodies, the state of the contemporary working environment and the dissonance in literacies between body and workplace. Through the application of semiotic and cultural studies, as well as drawing on theories of media, gender, labour, leisure, literacy and fashion, I investigate the position of women and their bodies within the contemporary Australian workplace.

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<sup>1</sup> L. Nickles, *The Change Agents*, ST. Martins Press, New York, 2001, pp. 155 – 158.

This thesis deploys oral histories to illuminate how women function in the changing Australian workplace. I have compiled these oral sources in order to capture specific experiences and portray the successes and struggles that are faced by the women employed in these sectors. The function of these histories in this thesis is to provide a memory of, to and for working women, revealing many of the unspoken assumptions and characteristics of the contemporary Australian workforce, such as the New Economy, an increasing non-standard workforce, the myth of 'work/life balance,' lifestyle, dissonant bodies in the workplace, and the compartmentalization of work from other social function including family life.

Within the nine chapters of this thesis, the research objective is to explore how women's bodies are located within and negotiate the contemporary Australian workforce. It begins with an examination of the conflation between 'self-help' and feminist texts, to map the troubled relationship between gender, power and the female body. The disparate functions of dress and bodies are important focuses in this research. The use of oral history, popular memory theory and the textual analysis of magazines is a way to interrogate the role of women's bodies and fashion in history. The use of oral and popular cultural sources is intentional. The goal is to develop an alternative system for remembering bodies and clothing, with the aim of transforming their historical relevance. The focal point of this thesis is assessing women's bodies and fashion in the workplace. By evaluating contemporary trends in women's work attire, I expose the disparity in the work clothes market in relation to quality, accessibility, functionality and price.

This doctoral thesis deploys work theory and the ideologies of the ‘New’ and ‘Old’ Economy. Throughout this project, I trace the differences in workplace customs and representations. The purpose of the thesis – and indeed the original contribution to knowledge – is to demonstrate that women and men must be literate in not only the workplace, but also in workplace clothing. Only when moving from everyday to reflexive literacies can relevant models of discrimination and oppression within the ‘New Economy’ be revealed and addressed.

While presenting the voices and views of working women, this research proposes a strategy for a change in education and the requirement of mentoring in relation to careers and the ‘new’ work order. The latter chapters are focussed on tracing working life in the new knowledge economy within Australia. They explore the notion of ‘supplementary’ work in relation to ‘lifestyle’ change and investigates the creative industries, the creative class and ponders the dilemma of the creative industries in Australia. The objective of this thesis is to not only to critique, but also to gather and deploy the words of women in the contemporary workplace, as both inspiration and model for the strategies required to instigate change. The final chapters capture a proactive desire to not only discuss difference, but make a difference. The probing of dissonant literacies in the workplace opens the tight and troubling relationship between women and bodies.