



Nicole K. Rivas

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF FASHION

Memories of Worn History, Secondhand
Objects, and Material (Auto)Biographies
of First-Generation Americans

Fashion and Personal
Style Studies

Collection Editor

JOSEPH H. HANCOCK II

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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This book is dedicated to my mother, Nelly Ovando, and father, Dr. Rodolfo Rivas, whose steady words of encouragement strengthened my writing and nurtured my curiosity. They supported my ideas with unwavering faith, even when those ideas were not yet fully understood.

I also dedicate this work to all of my ancestors who came before me. To my maternal *abuelita*, Martha Ovando, who planted the seed of building a meaningful legacy, one that blossomed into the many opportunities I have been able to benefit from as a first-generation American and second-generation immigrant. And to my paternal great-grandfather, Santiago Chavarria II, whose personal drive and ambition led him from business into academia, choosing to share his insights with others and ignite a love of knowledge in future curious minds and thinkers—a path I, too, have unintentionally followed in pursuing a career in academia.

I also honor my *tia* Cecilia Ovando, the oral historian of my maternal family. Through her devoted enthusiasm for preserving and sharing the stories, memories, and oral traditions of our ancestors, she gave me a deeper understanding of who I am at my core. Because of her, I know my lineage—not just as history, but as a living thread that connects me to my place in the world.

I am the result of the effort my ancestors set into motion long before me, and this book stands as a continuation of their legacy.

Abstract

Using inherited garments, how is the choice of clothing significant in the context of the wearer's surroundings and culture? How does it communicate one's self-identity as a first-generation American?

When we dress ourselves, we are visually narrating to the world how we wish to be seen. Therefore, styling is a form of storytelling. It is a medium that provides a framework to exhibit cultural connections and ethnic pride celebrated through place and time; the outfit tells a story. Author **Nicole K. Rivas**, combines visual and material culture to investigate sartorial representations of self-identity from the perspective of first-generation Americans using garments of the past through contemporary archaeology. Touching on the themes of memory, upbringing, culture, and autonomy, this book is ideal reading for scholars of Fashion and Personal Style, Textiles, Art, Material Culture, Cultural Anthropology, Archival Studies, Gender Studies, and History.

Key words

Clothing; lived experience; inheritance; hand-me-downs; family heirlooms; secondhand objects; identity; memory; material culture; first-generation Americans

Note on language

In earlier stages of this research, I used the term *first-generation Americans* to describe the individuals and communities at the center of my case studies. While my work engages with experiences commonly categorized as *second-generation immigrants*, I retain the term first-generation Americans as a deliberate conceptual choice. This distinction more accurately reflects the scope of the book, which centers on garments worn within the United States by individuals who established their lives in an American context, and whose clothing was subsequently inherited, re-worn, and reinterpreted by a U.S.-born generation.

Although the United States Census Bureau defines first-generation immigrants as foreign-born individuals and second-generation immigrants as those with at least one foreign-born parent, this text departs from strictly demographic classifications (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Instead, it adopts language that better accounts for the material and experiential dimensions of identity formation as they unfold across generations. The emphasis, therefore, is not solely on birthplace or parental origin, but on lived experience, cultural transmission, and the afterlives of dress.

At its core, this book foregrounds the lived experiences of first-generation Americans, arguing that the material (auto)biographies illuminate layered histories of adaptation, aspiration, and belonging. The use of parentheses in the term *material (auto)*

biographies reflects a theoretical alignment with the formulation of “auto/biography” explored in *Memories of Dress: Recollections of Material Identities* (2023). In that volume, the slash construction is used to destabilize the distinction between autobiography and biography, emphasizing that accounts of dress are always simultaneously personal and relational, self-authored and collectively mediated.

By adapting this to *(auto)biographies*, the parentheses perform a similar but more flexible function. They signal that the “auto” is both present and contingent: clothes may carry autobiographical meaning—anchored in lived experience, memory, and the formation of selfhood—while also exceeding the individual, operating as biographical objects that accrue meaning through circulation, inheritance, and reinterpretation across different wearers and contexts. In this sense, these wardrobe pieces do not belong to a single, stable subject but participates in layered stories that move between self and other, past and present. It marks the instability of authorship and ownership in the narrative life of garments, stressing the way material objects mediate identities that are at once intimate, social, and transgenerational. Through fashion and dress, these attires operate as cultural texts—mediating visibility, negotiating identity, and situating individuals within broader social and historical frameworks.

While people often use the words dress and fashion interchangeably in popular discourse, scholars make a more precise distinction between the two. Building on the work of Joanne Eicher (1965; 1992) and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins (1965; 1992), *dress* can be understood as any action a person takes to alter, enhance, or cover the body. This concept goes beyond clothing

alone, encompassing practices like tattooing, applying makeup, wearing perfume, or choosing cosmetic procedures. The materials involved in dress are diverse and historically have included not just textiles and leather, but also metal, straw, paper, feathers, wood, and other substances (Eicher, 2010; Tortora, 2010).

While dress primarily refers to material practices and bodily modification, *fashion* functions as a social phenomenon. Drawing on cultural historian Christopher Breward's (2003; 2004) expansive definition, fashion is described as simultaneously a material object, a cultural practice, and a temporal event: an interface between body and environment; a medium for expressing taste, identity, and belief; and a cyclical yet innovative phenomenon structured by seasons, trends, and traditions that accumulate as layers of memory (as cited in Jenss, 2015). Through wearing old clothes or assembling modified styles in context to historical images, fashion enables personal and collective engagements with the past. It shapes how individuals within a culture or society behave, signaling belonging, distinction, and change.

In global discussions of dress and fashion, the concept of fashion is often treated as uniquely Western, a view shaped in part by the dominance of Western scholars and archives within fashion history (Tortora, 2010). Anthropological studies of non-Western cultures have historically focused on dress while often avoiding discussions of fashion, leading to the assumption that ancient or non-Western societies lacked a fashion process. As medieval historian Sarah-Grace Heller (2007) notes, evaluating fashion within a culture without vast cultural expertise is inherently complex.

Nevertheless, much of the existing literature continues to privilege Western fashion histories. However, with recent publications

like *The New Latin American Fashion Reader* (2026) and *Latin American and Latinx Fashion Design Today: ¡Moda Hoy!* (2024), this perspective has been thoughtfully challenged steadily. Despite the variety of definitions, scholars generally agree on two central aspects of fashion: it requires widespread acceptance and is characterized by limited duration (Tortora, 2010). Fashion relies on collective participation, yet that engagement is inherently temporary, making change a fundamental part of the fashion process.

The term *costume* has multiple applications. It may refer to clothing used in theater, film, television, or masquerade, with the intended meaning usually clarified by context. In museum and historical studies, garments that are collected, exhibited, and analyzed are often described as historical costume or simply costume. As a result, what some sources label as historical dress may appear elsewhere under the terms historical costume, costume, or historical fashion (Tortora, 2010). Additionally, costume can signify social position, reflecting distinctions of class, status, or rank in historical contexts.

Throughout this research, *fashion* is understood as a collective display of style, a social equation of aesthetics shaped by shared values, time, and cultural context. In the realm of clothing, fashion emerges from the relationship between a garment's functional purpose and its aesthetic presence. Garments themselves are the raw materials, cloth or fabric, while *dress* refers to the act of assembling and styling these materials into a recognizable look.

Central to this study is the concept of the *aesthetic gaze*: how individuals see themselves and how they wish to be seen by

others. By combining fashion history with the archaeology of women's attire, across specific periods and social contexts, this research connects visual languages of personal style to the formation of identity.

Material culture further grounds this analysis. It encompasses the collecting, preserving, and displaying of values, theories, and histories through objects. Garments, in particular, carry lived experiences and social meaning, allowing objects to function as archives of both personal and collective memory.

In analyzing the discourse surrounding secondhand objects, *discourse* is understood as the broader framework for examining the lifecycle and genealogy of these goods. The term *secondhand* serves as an umbrella for discussing object histories, including clothing and accessories, while *genealogy* denotes the biography of an object, encompassing its timeline (when and where it was produced, purchased, or inherited by its first wearer), history (who has owned it and the occasions and locations where it has been worn), and narrative (how was it used, worn, and styled throughout its lifespan).

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Introduction

At the end of 2018, I began conducting research trips to various archives across North America to better understand their purpose, mission, and public services, with the goal of sharing my findings. In March 2020, just before the global pandemic, Tracey Panek, Brand Historian at Levi Strauss & Co., reminded me that a fashion object's value is not determined solely by its condition or price, but by the story it holds. Researching and preserving a physical artifact is inseparable from uncovering its narrative. By emphasizing provenance and historical significance, artifacts are brought to life through storytelling.

A little over a year later, in July 2021, my research was further enriched during a visit to the ASU FIDM Museum collections, where fashion objects are acquired, valued, and made accessible to scholars. One collection encourages tactile engagement, allowing garments to be handled. This direct interaction provides insight into construction and materials while heightening curiosity about the stories these objects carry.

That same year, I pursued projects exploring the social and cultural value of "old clothes," challenging the perception that garments are "just clothes."¹ My work examines the social life of fashion objects and, more recently, the radical potential of fashion archiving as a feminist practice—the clothes we wear, the clothes we keep.²

My ongoing archival practice emphasizes subjective annotation. Beyond documenting condition, provenance, and loan records,

fashion archives should capture the events, memories, and emotions associated with each piece. Just as conservators meticulously record a garment's restoration, the stories embedded in worn objects deserve preservation. In this space, I position myself as a keeper of material memories—a custodian of lived clothes, both preloved and unworn.

As discussed by cultural historian and visual culture scholar Marius Kwint (1999), he argues that human memory has developed in close and reciprocal relation to the material objects that give it form and meaning; rather than functioning independently, memory and materiality co-evolve in a dialectical relationship. Kwint's (1999) engagement with literary critic and materiality expert Susan Stewart's notion of touch as a sensory bridge between subject and object, emphasizing that tactile encounters are inherently mutual, exerting force on both the body that touches and the object that is touched. Along similar lines, sociologist Sherry Turkle's (2007) assertion that objects participate actively in shaping thought and identity underscores the role of material things as partners in cognitive and emotional processes. This dynamic interplay between memory, materiality, and embodiment is particularly visible in clothing, which exists in intimate proximity to the body and leaves material impressions on the wearer. Through shaping bodily form and mediating lived experiences of corporeality and subjectivity, dress becomes embodied through everyday practices of wearing and styling (Jenss, 2015). Because of their closeness to the body, clothes play a particularly powerful role in shaping memory both at an intimate level and within broader cultural contexts, where former fashions and discarded garments

form the material and visual residues of earlier decades and generations.

Archival practice testifies to the complexity of how life is lived, documented, and remembered. When engaging with garments, it involves multiple layers. I observe each piece objectively—its color, fabric, construction, label, and wear—and estimate its era through silhouette and material. I consider sizing, former owners, and cultural implications such as vanity sizing, a practice of labeling clothing with smaller sizes than their actual measurements (*The Vintage Voyageur*, 2016–2019), or historical lifestyle differences. I then consider subjective annotations and ask: Who was this garment designed for? How was it worn and styled? Where was it worn? How might it be worn today? Provenance enriches understanding and can serve as a selling point when relocating an artifact. The most rewarding moments occur when vintage pieces return to their original archives.

Throughout the following chapters, I invite readers to adopt these approaches in their own exploration of dress practices. I act as a vessel, translating the lives of garments, memories, and people throughout my analysis. I approach fashion through the lens of contemporary archaeology, treating it as a cultural practice that both shapes and reflects communication, identity, and taste. The study of material culture situates fashion objects within human experience, social behavior, and historical narratives. What is your most cherished piece of clothing? What stories does it hold, and how do you care for it?

This perspective previously guided my podcast and research platform, *The Archaeology of Fashion: And The Discourse on*

Secondhand Objects (2021), a title inspired by Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And The Discourse on Language* (2010). Foucault examines how knowledge is produced and organized through discourse rather than linear histories, providing a framework for understanding fashion objects as governed by social, historical, and cultural rules. My project highlighted the stories behind secondhand objects, connecting visual and material culture to self-identity, memory, and the lifecycle of garments.

Early episodes explored hand-me-downs and family heirlooms from the perspective of first-generation Americans, reflecting my own experience carrying my *abuelita's* (affectionate name for grandmother in Spanish) 1970s leopard-print dress, my Salvadorian mother's 14K gold earrings, or my Venezuelan father's 1980s Pulsion cable-knit sweater across various U.S. cities. These objects are integrated into daily life, woven into my wardrobe, forming part of my fashion literacy and research.

In addition, professional distinctions inform my work: a fashion historian researches origin and historical significance; a fashion archivist preserves artifacts to museum standards; a fashion archaeologist uncovers garments across thrift stores, estate sales, and private collections, tracing their histories. Scholars have attempted to define fashion, suggesting that it implies an elite, symbolic mode of dress, a recognition of clothing as art, and a collective display of taste or activity (Entwistle, 2000; Kawamura, 2018; Welters and Lillethun, 2018; Wilson, 2003). Over time, garments once "in fashion" evolve into heirlooms, hand-me-downs, and secondhand goods, reflecting layered social histories.

The archaeology of fashion, or fashion archaeology, applies methodologies from material culture and traditional archaeology to study clothing as evidence of human behavior. Key questions include: What have I found? What is it made from? Why is it shaped this way? Is it complete? Through this lens, garments reveal cultural meanings, social norms, and individual stories. Unlike conventional archives, this book emphasizes public engagement, demonstrating how garments mediate identity, memory, and historical understanding. It seeks to bring these narratives to life, emphasizing the relationship between objects and their wearers.

In discussing secondhand objects, I treat discourse as the lifecycle and genealogy of garments—their creation, ownership, use, and styling. My focus, however, is on the emotion transferred from wearer to material, rather than that imposed by a maker or designer. Without these stories, an object is merely functional. With them, it gains emotional value, making it priceless. By combining visual and material culture, I explore how clothing mediates self-identity, social history, and memory. The items studied include personal archives, vintage fashions, secondhand clothes, inherited garments, hand-me-downs, and family heirlooms, all contextualized through their lifecycles and processes of stylization.

This book does not claim to be a comprehensive account of fashion, memory, or material culture. Rather, it is offered as an introduction—an entry point for readers interested in exploring how non-traditional archives, particularly personal closets, can be understood as sites of cultural knowledge and material history. The following analysis functions as an initial guide for

drawing connections between everyday garments and broader questions of memory, preservation, and meaning. Many of the case studies presented here emerge from Latine communities and from women's lived experiences. This focus reflects both the perspectives I know most intimately and those I hold as most sacred, as my professional and educational pursuits are inseparable from my personal history. In preserving these stories through my work, I seek not only to document material culture, but also to recognize myself within the narratives I choose to protect. At the same time, I leave room to explore expansive narratives from diverse and marginalized communities beyond my own, recognizing that these stories are vital to understanding the full richness of material culture.

Chapter one examines the personal and emotional significance of objects, emphasizing how family collections preserve traces of lived experience. Chapter two explores how hand-me-downs and inherited garments bridge generations, fostering identity formation and preserving cultural memory. Chapter three extends this analysis to first-generation American families, highlighting creative and hybrid expressions of personal style and fashion that negotiate ancestry and contemporary selfhood. It specifically examines inherited garments among first-generation Americans as material artifacts through which personal and familial histories are communicated. These garments constitute curated collections retained to document the narratives of their wearers, underscoring the importance of fashion as a form of historical preservation. By tracing how garments move from utilitarian hand-me-downs to intentional wardrobe choices and ultimately to family heirlooms, this chapter situates dress as a key

medium through which intergenerational memory and cultural identity are materialized. Chapter four illustrates the domestic archive as a living, interactive space, where objects are preserved and activated, allowing descendants to engage with family history through touch, wear, and storytelling.

Across these chapters, a central theme emerges: objects are more than material, they are vessels of meaning, memory, and emotion. Garments and artifacts function as a language through which families communicate values, heritage, and resilience. They allow wearers to assert identity, honor ancestors, and reinterpret the past in new contexts. Through the circulation of these objects, intergenerational dialogue continues, fostering cultural continuity while enabling personal expression.

Ultimately, this work invites readers to reconsider the objects in their own lives. Beyond utility, garments, heirlooms, and personal artifacts carry stories waiting to be uncovered, shared, and transformed. They challenge us to reflect on what we inherit, what we preserve, and how we leave traces for future generations. By engaging with these material histories, we participate in an ongoing conversation that binds families, communities, and cultures across time.

Learning objectives

1. **Understand the value of fashion objects beyond monetary worth**

Readers will learn to appreciate garments as cultural artifacts, where meaning, memory, and provenance are as important as physical condition or market value.

2. **Apply an interdisciplinary approach to fashion research**

Readers will gain insight into combining methods from archival studies, archaeology, material culture, and fashion history to analyze, preserve, and interpret clothing and personal artifacts.

3. **Explore the relationship between garments, identity, and social history**

Readers will investigate how clothing mediates self-expression, generational memory, and cultural narratives, especially in contexts like first-generation American experiences.

4. **Examine the role of storytelling and discourse in shaping knowledge of fashion**

Readers will understand how garments, archives, and historical narratives are structured and interpreted within social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

5. **Develop practical archival and analytical skills for engaging with fashion objects**

Readers will learn methods for documenting, handling, and analyzing garments, including assessing provenance, construction, and emotional or cultural significance, turning objects into “living” historical texts.

1

Guardians of material memory: Collecting and preserving everyday clothes as cultural heritage

“Criticism of clothing is taken more personally, suggesting a high correlation between clothing and personal identity and values.” -Jules David Prown.

Our contemporary understanding of cultural heritage is broad and unbounded. The English adjective *cultural* stems from the Latin *cultura* which figuratively refers to the care bestowed on plants, a sort of mode of growing or an honoring. It traces the meanings of “belonging to, or relating to the culture of a particular society, people, or period” (OED, 2024, sense 1.b section). Heritage, on the other hand, borrows from the French noun *eritage* and *heritage* meaning inheritance or generally, “ancestral estates devolved by law upon the heir,” hence the phrase heirloom (OED, 2024, sense 1.b section). When the two words are

combined to form cultural heritage, it signifies “artifacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance” (UNESCO, 2009). It is a generational inheritance of the tangible and intangible. From tangible forms that can range from material traces left behind expressed in the garments or generic raw materials of what a person wears, to intangible oral testimonies, storytelling, and community bonds. Each form of cultural heritage carries an emotional memory, intergenerational connections, and transmits the cultural features of a community, family, or identity.

Cultural heritage offers a link to the past with the importance of specific techniques practiced in the present. For instance, using material culture methodologies practiced within the field of archaeology when examining a garment of the past or second-hand object, it becomes a framework to uncover new findings. Material culture is the physical objects that represent a particular culture and are used by humans (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). It is the study through artifacts of the shared values, ideas, perspectives, and assumptions held by a community or society during a specific period; “a mode of cultural investigation in its use of objects as primary data” (Prown, 1982, p. 1). Therefore, clothing is a “distinctive dress worn by members of any profession” for its functional purpose and can be seen as an intimate part of human behavior as it reflects a collective group activity for certain periods (Kawamura, 2018, p. 4).

The field of archaeology requires participants to explore excavation sites to reveal hidden secrets or lost narratives about

human history. These stories are often discovered and pieced together by the analysis and identification of recovered artifacts that provide clues into how people lived in the past (SAA, n.d.). The archaeology of the contemporary past focuses on the most recent past of the late nineteenth to twenty-first century and is an emerging area of research activity that deals with the world we have experienced and shaped through our daily lives and practices. The modern landscape contains traces left yesterday alongside those of prehistory and everything in between. It is a subfield that is not defined by a focus on a specific period, but rather as a particular disposition toward time, material things, and the archaeological process (Gonzalez-Ruibal, 2019; Harrison and Breithoff, 2017).

Thus, the archaeology of fashion combines forms of discovery, both past and present *zeitgeists*, and the preservation of socio-cultural narratives through the relationship of the object and its wearer. It is through stylization, which is an everyday practice of constructing a look that involves “a series of decisions that are informed by our upbringing, our community, our mood, and our experiences” to demonstrate “how we wish to be ‘seen’” in attempts to decode cultural meanings of dress, fashion, and clothing (Jenkins, 2020). Fashion implies an elite and symbolic mode of dress or a recognition of designing clothing as an art form not just as a craft—a sort of collective display of taste (Welters and Lillethun, 2018; see also Entwistle, 2000; Wilson, 2003), but it is through the practice of dress that an arrangement of principal outer garments and personal attire are crucial when understanding the construction of a *look* and desire to produce a visual statement, refining one’s self-identity through sartorial

representations. Fashion archeology is a narrative of where and how garments change, their recovery, scientific analysis, and assessment of historical clothing. It seeks to unveil what might have otherwise seeped through the fabric of history. What can these objects tell us about the people who made, wore, or collected them? How might examining tangible items reshape the way we understand the everyday objects around us, including our own wardrobes? In what ways do echoes of the past continue to influence contemporary fashion cultures, secondhand practices, personal style, and identity?

Personal wardrobes and everyday clothes as cultural heritage

Getting dressed is an intimate experience with oneself. A vulnerable state for the human body as we unveil or layer garments, clothed for the public space. A central element of building one's identity. Fashion as a cultural practice incorporates and influences all other forms of communication and expression through views on cultivating identity and tastes. It also focuses on self-fashioning practices, and specifically how the "dressed body functions as a site to variously uphold and upend ideals of American identity" (Clark and Peters, 2024, p. 8). The study of cultural history of the material world explores secondhand items in context with the storytelling of these objects.

Clothes are more than inanimate objects. The garments worn on our bodies provide a sense of comfort, a sort of endoskeleton lining of fabric clothed along our bodies. Any sort of visible wear reveals a story where a collection of memories is preserved within each detailed wear. While exploring personal wardrobes

that include inherited garments, hand-me-downs, and family heirlooms, these secondhand objects are kept with intentions to pass down to future generations. Now, what is intriguing about these case studies is that these articles of clothing are not stored in archival boxes with acid-free tissue, but worn, styled and used as a fashion literacy or to be “understood as the ability to decipher sartorial assemblages within the framework of shifting taste preferences” for the wearer’s everyday wardrobe (Mackinney-Valentin, 2010, para. 6). The power of storytelling remains the driving force for collecting and preserving everyday clothes as cultural heritage.

Storytelling

Storytelling is an ancient practice that reflects community-building; it is a powerful connector where stories can bring people together. Anecdotes, folklore, tales, and oral history allow community members to better understand one another as it resonates with everyone (Stephens, 2022). Today, archives—whether formal institutions or family-maintained collections—are so much more than the objects they store; they are about people.

Avid collectors of fashion question the following after tumultuous acquisition expeditions: What have I found? What is it made from? Why is it that shape? Is it complete? These intellectual curiosities have evolved into current inquiries examining when exactly does a fashion object become a story? The importance of preserving the physical integrity of objects and the stories they tell requires us to amplify these stories, connecting them with new people and fostering a profound appreciation for their cultural significance.



Figure 1.1: 1967–1969 Levi's® 505 jeans with customized patches and trimmings featured in *You Say You Want a Revolution? Records and Rebels 1966–1970* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, exploring the cultural impact of the late 1960s through music and performance alongside fashion, film, design and political activism. The exhibition featured five vintage Levi's® garments on loan from the Levi Strauss & Co. Archives, illustrating how the wearers of Levi's® embodied the energy of the era.

Source: Photograph courtesy of Levi Strauss & Co. Archives.

For instance, during a research trip to the Levi Strauss & Co. Archives, an artifact previously displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum's 2016 exhibition, *You Say You Want a Revolution? Records and Rebels 1966–1970* reveal how the story behind a fashion object becomes the deciding factor for new acquisitions.

In a conversation with Levi Strauss & Co.'s brand historian Tracey Panek, she explains a custom pair of Levi's 505 jeans with colorful