



Elizabeth Kealy-Morris

NOT FITTING IN

Preppy Style and Exclusion in
American Suburbia

Fashion and Personal
Style Studies

Collection Editor

JOSEPH H. HANCOCK II

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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First published in 2026 by Lived Places Publishing

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781916704671 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781916704695 (ePDF)
ISBN: 9781916704688 (ePUB)

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Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design
Typeset by Newgen Publishing, UK

Lived Places Publishing
P.O. Box 1845
47 Echo Avenue
Miller Place, NY 11764

www.livedplacespublishing.com



Figure 0.1: Raymond Joseph Kealy, Sr. (1914–1954).

Dedicated with love and gratitude to Raymond Joseph Kealy, Sr. (1914–1954), the grandfather I never met, whose life was forever shaped by the Second World War in the Pacific. Due to this sacrifice my father, Thomas Patrick Kealy, Sr., built a professional life through the US federal aid available via the G.I. Bill. Though my generation never had the chance to thank him, we live in the wake of his courage.

Acknowledgments

Many people have contributed to the development of this book, from the lived experiences it draws upon to the theoretical and archival work that underpins it. I begin by expressing my deep gratitude to my doctoral supervisors, Professor Jeff Adams and Dr Julian Waite at the University of Chester, whose sustained support of my practice-based doctoral project, *The artist's book: Making as embodied knowledge of practice and the self* (Kealy-Morris, 2017), shaped the intellectual foundations from which this book has grown. Their encouragement of my work in autoethnography, cultural memory of dress and place, and practice-based research continues to inform my teaching research, publishing, and editorial practice.

I am grateful to the subject specialists whose expertise was central to the development of this book. My sincere thanks to Sarah Webb, Fashion Subject Librarian at Manchester Metropolitan University (UK), whose generosity, deep knowledge of fashion archives, and recognition that images are research data were invaluable. While many of the materials she helped me locate could not be reproduced here due to copyright restrictions, they have informed both this book and my earlier published work. I also extend my thanks to Ann Wilson, Special Collections Technician, and Jade Papa, Curator of the Textile and Costume Collection at Thomas Jefferson University (Philadelphia, US), whose assistance in locating issues of *American Fabrics and Fashions* was critical to my research and this book's narrative.

I would also like to thank David Parker at Lived Places Publishing, whose belief in this project and in my voice as an author made this book possible. I am especially grateful to Professor Joseph Hancock II, editor of the Fashion series, for his intellectual generosity and confidence in the significance of this work. Their support and commitment to publish scholarship grounded in lived experience have been deeply affirming.

My enduring gratitude goes to my parents, Tom and Gina Kealy, for their lifelong support and for generously sharing family stories and photographs throughout the development of this book. I am especially thankful to my father for sharing memories of his father, Ray, whose life and absence continue to shape our family; this book is dedicated to his memory. I also thank my younger brother, Patrick Kealy, for his help in digitizing images, a contribution that has strengthened the narrative.

Finally, my deepest love and gratitude to my husband, Chris Morris, and our son, Colin Morris. Your patience at my frequent absences from family life, constant support, encouragement, and love made this culmination of years of work possible.

Abstract

This book explores how everyday dress shapes experiences of belonging, exclusion, and bodily difference within American suburban life. Focusing on the mid-to-late twentieth century, the book examines how ideals of bodily ease, respectability, and fitting in became embedded in casual dress styles and the bodies expected to wear it. Grounded in the author's lived experience of growing up with scoliosis, the book draws on embodied dress theory, dress history, disability studies, and autoethnography to introduce the concept of Body Dressing Work. Through memory, photographs, and lived experience, it demonstrates how social norms are quietly enforced through ordinary practices of appearance and place.

Key words

American sportswear; body dressing work; cultural memory of dress; disability; khaki; polo shirt; preppy style; shift dress; smart casual style; suburbia

Author biography

Elizabeth Kealy-Morris is Senior Lecturer in Fashion, Ethics, and Inclusion at the Manchester Fashion Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University in Manchester, UK and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. Living with a spinal disability, her research examines how dress, disability, and belonging intersect, with a focus on material practices of dressing, cultural memory, autoethnography, and the politics of social marginalization. She serves as Associate Editor for *Fashion and Textiles* and *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture*, where she guest edited the 2026 special issue "Dressing Through Pandemics." She is co-editor of *Memories of Dress* (Bloomsbury, 2023), and her research at the intersection of fashion, memory, and popular culture has been featured in *Le Monde*, *The Conversation*, *The Guardian*, and *The Telegraph*.

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Learning objectives

After reading this book, students will be able to:

1. Explain why getting dressed involves work

Describe dressing as a form of ongoing effort that involves the body, emotions, and social expectations, rather than as a simple routine or personal choice.

2. Use the idea of body dressing work

Apply the concept of Body Dressing Work to everyday dressing situations in order to understand how effort, adjustment, and endurance differ between bodies.

3. Understand disability as part of everyday life

Recognize disability as a relational and ordinary experience that helps make visible how social norms around appearance and fitting in operate.

4. Identify how clothing enforces social norms

Analyze how clothing shapes ideas about fitting in, looking appropriate, and belonging, and how these expectations can include or exclude different bodies.

5. Connect personal experience to wider social contexts

Link lived experiences of dressing to place, culture, and history, showing how individual experiences are shaped by broader social and cultural forces.

1

Introduction

The brace, or the moment my body betrayed me.

It is a very sunny and hot day in July 1978. I am 11 years old. I am familiar with the doctor's office; I have been visiting regularly for the past year. It is narrow and long, the view from the equally narrow and tall window is of the back of the hospital where all the exhaust fans have their outlets. The walls are gray, I would have to come close to the window to look up and see sky. The view is no different in July than in January; only the sun that shines in is different: stronger and hotter.

I am sitting with my mother to my right; we are waiting for the doctor to arrive with his opinion about the latest x-rays of my spine, taken in the past hour in a different part of the hospital. Up until now my spinal curvature has been within an acceptable scale of curve under the careful eye of a consultant children's orthopedic specialist at Boston Children's Hospital the past year.

The doctor arrives; he sits on his desk facing us; he towers over us. He delivers his verdict which at the time is a life sentence: my spinal curve has grown to the unacceptable amount of 23° (Figure 1.1), and I will now be fitted for the 'Boston orthopedic brace' (Figure 1.2) to wear 23 hours a day (to halt the advance of the curve). My world collapsed quietly and soundlessly.

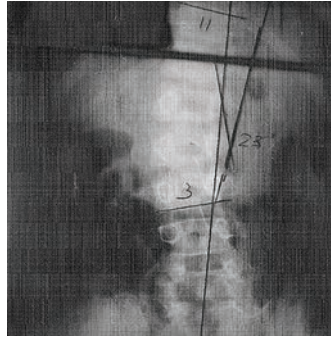


Figure 1.1: X-ray of my spinal curve having progressed to 23°, July 1978. Digital scan. © Author's own photograph.



Figure 1.2: The two braces I was prescribed. The smaller was fitted in July 1978 when I was aged 11, the larger possibly in 1981, when I was aged 13 or 14. Digital photograph. © Author's own photograph.

I found out that day that I have an untrustworthy body; a body that reflected what I knew all along: I wasn't good enough. I spend the next three years in the brace for twenty-three hours a day. I outgrow one and am prescribed another. It hurts all the time—pinching and poking and causing me welts where the t-shirt I wear to protect my skin from the plastic has creased. I walk strangely; I wear unfashionable tent pinafores my mother makes me to hide where the brace protrudes.

That moment in the doctor's office did not yet have language attached to it. What it carried instead was a bodily certainty—an understanding that my body had become something to be managed, monitored, and accounted for. In the days and years that followed, this knowledge was lived most acutely not in clinical encounters, but in the ordinary routines of getting dressed, moving through school corridors, and appearing in public. The brace did not simply alter my body; it altered how my body entered the world, how it was seen, and how it was required to fit.

It is from this everyday terrain—of clothing, visibility, and adjustment—that the questions driving this book emerge. This book asks what disability does in the context of dress and dressing, and what kinds of demands are placed on bodies that do not easily comply with normative expectations. This book will explore the ways in which dressing becomes the site where medical intervention, social judgement, and personal endurance converge.

Why dress matters

Dress is one of the primary ways bodies are rendered socially legible, and judged in everyday life. As scholars of embodied fashion have long argued, clothing mediates the relationship between body and social world, shaping how bodies are read, judged, and disciplined within cultural hierarchies of normalcy and belonging (Craik, 2009; Entwistle, 2023). Far from operating as a neutral backdrop to identity, dress is a lived practice through which everyday social expectations of propriety, respectability, and fit are negotiated in relation to others (Woodward, 2005, 2007). While clothing is often framed as expressive or freely selected,

embodied fashion theory emphasizes that it is equally a site of constraint, requiring bodies to align with regulating assumptions about appearance, health, and comportment. For bodies marked as different or deviant, these negotiations are intensified: garments do not simply communicate identity but become tools for managing visibility and mitigating stigma. The ambiguity of dress—its openness to misreading across social and cultural contexts—carries heightened stakes for disabled bodies, for whom social participation often requires sustained effort. It is within this everyday terrain of adjustment, vigilance, and negotiation that the labor of dressing becomes effortful and sustained.

To address this, the book introduces Body Dressing Work (Kealy-Morris, 2023; Kealy-Morris and Poage, 2025)¹ as an analytic framework for understanding dressing as embodied labor, shaped by norms of fit and appearance, and common to all who dress, not as something neutral or automatic. This concept provides a way to think about how clothing mediates the relationship between body and world, and how effort, adjustment, and endurance are unevenly distributed across bodies. Before turning to the historical, spatial, and stylistic regimes that shape these demands, it is necessary to set out this framework clearly.

Body Dressing Work

This book uses Body Dressing Work as an analytic framework through which dressing can be understood as embodied, affective, cognitive, and socio-material labor through which individuals negotiate clothing, appearance, and self-representation in everyday life. As visualized in Figure 1.3, the conceptual model of the framework demonstrates the effort involved in dressing

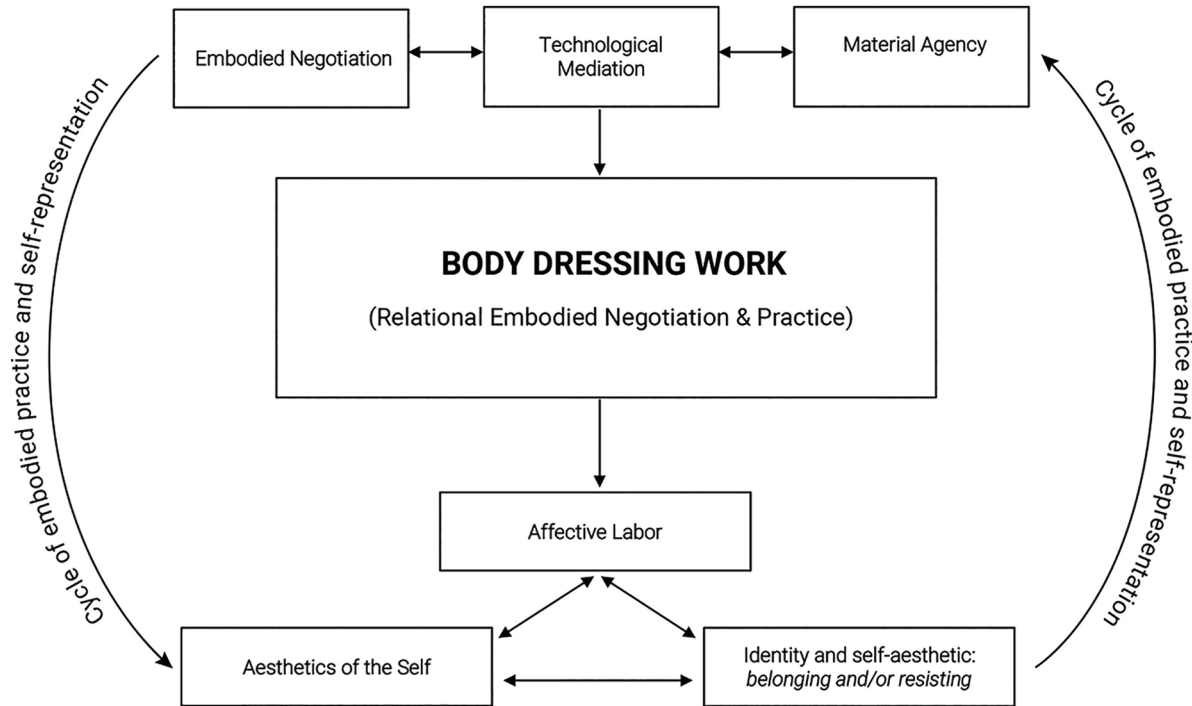


Figure 1.3: The Body Dressing Work conceptual model, illustrating the relational, affective, material, and technological dimensions of clothing inclusion and identity negotiation. © Elizabeth Kealy-Morris and Jennifer Poage.

as ongoing—a process that involves anticipation, adjustment, compromise, and decision-making in relation to the body, garments, social norms, and environments in which dressing takes place and the clothed body will be seen. Further, the framework exposes that getting dressed is shaped not only by personal preference or aesthetic desire, but by structural conditions such as cultural standards of fit, gender, taste, and class.

At its center is the everyday labor of dressing: the physical, cognitive, and emotional work involved in selecting, adjusting, and wearing clothing. This emotional and physical effort unfolds through interactions between embodied negotiation, material agency, and technological mediation, which shape how garments fit, move, and function on the body. These processes produce feelings such as comfort, confidence, exposure, or belonging, while also shaping how individuals present themselves visually through dress. Choices about fit, color, silhouette, and styling communicate identity and social positioning, feeding back into the ongoing practices through which people dress and appear in everyday life.

Disability makes this relational labor more visible, revealing how dressing is structured by social norms, material constraints, and infrastructures that unevenly distribute the work of appearing, fitting, and participating. Within this framework, disability does not sit outside ordinary dressing practices but renders visible how this labor accumulates unevenly across bodies. As an embodied fashion theory framework, Body Dressing Work shifts attention from what clothing means to what clothing does—and what must be done to make dressing possible, acceptable, or sustainable in everyday life. Across

this book, *Body Dressing Work* enables an examination of how dressing operates as a form of everyday labor through which social norms are encountered, negotiated, performed, and lived.

Having established *Body Dressing Work* as a way of understanding dressing as embodied and unevenly distributed labor, it becomes necessary to situate the framework within disability studies. The demands of dressing do not arise in abstraction, but in relation to bodies that are already marked, managed, and evaluated through cultural ideas about normalcy and deviation. Attending to disability clarifies why dressing so often exceeds questions of style or choice and instead becomes a site where bodily difference is negotiated, rendered visible, compelled into conformity, or a platform for resistance to normative expectations.

Disability, embodiment, and ambivalent belonging

This book is grounded in disability studies, but it approaches disability neither as a fixed category nor as a singular identity, and not solely as a medical condition defined through treatment and cure. Instead, disability is understood as a relational and embodied experience produced through the interaction of bodies, environments, social norms, and expectations. From this perspective, disability is not located entirely within the body nor entirely within the social world, but emerges in the space between them, where belonging is negotiated and often unsettled. This negotiation is not necessarily desired, but routinely demanded of people living with disability.

Within disability studies, the medical model has historically framed disability as deficit, locating the problem within the impaired body and orienting intervention toward treatment or correction (Oliver, 2009; Thomas, 2010). In contrast, the social model shifts attention to the role of social and environmental barriers, emphasizing the need for political, architectural, and institutional change (Charlton, 1998; Gleeson, 1999; Barnes, 2019; Watson, Roulstone and Thomas, 2019). While the social model has been crucial in challenging pathologizing accounts of disability, it does not fully account for the everyday, intimate effort of living in and with a body that is persistently marked as out of place. The ongoing work of adjustment, vigilance, and endurance required to navigate ordinary life often exceeds the explanatory reach of both models.

It is within this gap that this book situates its analysis, drawing on critical disability theory to examine how disability is relationally produced through intersecting systems of power, representation, and normativity (Garland-Thomson, 1996, 2002; McRuer, 2006). Robert McRuer's concept of "compulsory able-bodiedness," developed in dialogue with Adrienne Rich's (1986) notion of "compulsory heterosexuality," illuminates how cultural norms construct able-bodiedness as both natural and desirable, rendering other bodily forms marginal or unintelligible. Alison Kafer's (2013) *Feminist, Queer, Crip* further extends this critique by challenging linear narratives of progress and inclusion, insisting on collective political and social vision that takes disabled lives and futures seriously. Dan Goodley (2025) points to the importance of everyday acts of resistance in disabled lives, a perspective taken up in Ben Barry's research on "fashion hacking" (Barry

and Drak, 2019; Barry *et al.*, 2023). These accounts validate how resistance often takes place through subtle, embodied dressing practices rather than overt political action. Together, these approaches enable disability to be understood not as exclusion alone, but as a condition of ambivalent legibility, in which participation in everyday life is possible but negotiated, effortful, and precarious. This framing foregrounds Body Dressing Work as an analytic framework for understanding dressing as active, embodied effort common to all who dress. It demonstrates how this work is unevenly distributed and intensified for disabled people negotiating visibility and legibility within normative social worlds, without positioning disability as its primary or exclusive site.

Disability here is not positioned as exceptional to ordinary life, but as a condition through which the workings of normativity come into view. The demands placed on bodies—regarding posture, movement, appearance, comportment, and self-presentation—are rarely articulated explicitly; they are learned through repetition, correction, and comparison. For bodies that do not conform easily to these expectations, disability becomes legible not only through medical diagnosis, but through social friction: moments of misfit, exposure, and adjustment that accumulate over time. These instants are often small and ordinary, yet they carry disproportionate affective weight. This book attends to those moments not as failures of individual adaptation, but as evidence of how norms are enforced, endured, negotiated, and resisted.

Central to this analysis is the recognition that disability is deeply entangled with questions of visibility, stigma, belonging, and standing out via self-presentation. Drawing on sociological accounts of stigma and spoiled identity (Goffman, 2009a),

disability is approached as an ambivalent social position—one in which the subject is simultaneously hyper-visible and overlooked, scrutinized, and dismissed. This ambivalence is particularly acute in relation to dress, where clothing functions as both a means of self-presentation and a site of social regulation (Goffman, 2009b; Davis, 1989). Clothing has the capacity to conceal, reveal, normalize, or amplify bodily difference, and disabled bodies are often required to manage these effects with heightened care and vigilance. The emotional effort involved—anticipating reactions, mitigating judgement, and negotiating exposure—is inseparable from the material and physical effort of dressing itself.

Girlhood intensifies these dynamics. Western normative femininity is closely bound to ideals of bodily neatness, modesty, proportionality, and visual coherence, all of which are reinforced through clothing. Disabled girlhood, as it is explored in this book, is therefore not simply a matter of exclusion from fashion or style, but of being positioned as misaligned with the temporal and aesthetic expectations of “becoming.” The pressure to appear effortless, appropriate, and contained sits uneasily alongside bodies that require accommodation, adjustment, or visible intervention. Through employing autoethnographic reflection throughout its pages, this tension is exposed in personal memory of flashpoints that shaped my girlhood and early adulthood. This book treats this pressure “to appear” as socially and structurally produced—an effect of cultural ideals that privilege ease, autonomy, and bodily control.

Importantly, this analysis resists both tragic and inspirational framings of disability. Disability is not presented here as a story

of loss to be mourned, nor as an obstacle heroically overcome through individual determination. Such narratives obscure the ongoing, repetitive nature of what is required and deflect attention from the social conditions that produce exclusion in the first place. Instead, disability is approached as an ordinary, if unevenly distributed, condition of living—one that reveals how much work is required to participate in everyday social life when bodies do not align with normative expectations.

By positioning disability in this way, the book foregrounds embodiment as a site of knowledge rather than deficiency. The experiences examined here—of dressing, adjusting, camouflaging, and enduring—are not treated as anecdotal evidence, but as analytic entry points into understanding how norms of appearance, health, and belonging are lived. Disability does not sit alongside the analysis of dress as an additional theme; it structures the analysis from within. In doing so, this chapter establishes the conditions under which *Body Dressing Work* can be understood not as a framework for disabled experience alone, but as a lens through which the unequal distribution of dressing labor across all bodies becomes visible.

Understanding disability as relational and ordinary, rather than exceptional, raises questions about how such experiences can be known and analyzed. The forms of labor described here—adjustment, vigilance, endurance—rarely register in official records or dominant histories of dress. To attend to them requires methods capable of holding together memory, embodiment, and material practice, and of treating lived experience not as illustration, but as a site of critical insight.

Methodological positioning: Autoethnography, memory, visual material

Methodologically, this book brings autoethnography, memory work, and visual analysis into dialogue with embodied dress theory in order to attend to the lived, everyday labor of dressing. Personal narrative is used as a site of analysis through which theory is generated, tested, and refined. This approach resists both confessional excess and theoretical abstraction, positioning lived experience as a form of critical knowledge. Photographs, garments, and remembered dressing practices function here as material traces of social expectation, bodily constraint, and negotiated belonging. Thus, lived experience is foregrounded not as anecdotal evidence, but as a critical method for examining how clothing norms are encountered, resisted, and endured across time and place. Related practice-based explorations of disability, ordinariness, and embodied resistance appear in my work on creative practice and suburban space (Kealy-Morris, 2016; 2017; forthcoming).

Autoethnography, embodied labor, and ordinary endurance

Autoethnography brings together three interrelated dimensions: the auto (self), the ethno (culture), and the graphy (representation). In this book, it is used as a methodological approach that treats personal experience not as private testimony, but as analytically productive material through which cultural norms, expectations, and forms of regulation can be

examined. Autoethnographic work often draws on memory and engagement with material traces—such as photographs, garments, or domestic objects—to explore how individual lives are shaped within broader social and spatial contexts. Central to this approach is reflexivity, understood here as sustained attention to how embodied experience is negotiated in relation to social norms. Narrative practices of showing and telling are therefore employed not for affective display, but to render visible the often ordinary, repetitive effort through which bodies are made to fit.

Autoethnographic practice opens up ways of writing and visualizing private and social identities through the analysis of one's own cultural positioning (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Adams, Jones and Ellis, 2022). This approach is distinct from autobiography. While both involve first-person narration and the recall of memory, autoethnography situates the self explicitly within the social, historical, and spatial conditions that give experience its form. Memory is not treated as self-contained or introspective, but as relational and structured, shaped by dominant representations and normative expectations. In this way, autoethnography enables the articulation of alternative meanings that challenge marginalizing accounts and claim analytic legitimacy for lived, embodied experience (Neumann, 1996).

In this book, autoethnography operates as a methodological thread woven throughout the manuscript. Written passages of personal experience appear alongside historical analysis, garment studies, and visual material, functioning as sites of inquiry rather than illustration. These passages are deliberately positioned to test and refine the book's central framework, allowing concepts such as fit, visibility, and endurance to be examined as

lived processes rather than abstract categories. Autoethnography is thus mobilized here as a means of tracing Body Dressing Work over time, attending to the ordinary, often unremarked labor through which dressing, embodiment, and belonging are negotiated in everyday life.

Memory

Throughout the book, memory functions not as nostalgia or recollection alone, but as an embodied, material, and cultural practice through which the demands of dressing become analytically visible. Several memory theories are engaged in within the manuscript, all of which are discussed briefly here.

The body carries memory not only through recollection, but through posture, sensation, and habit—registers that exceed conscious narration. This embodied memory appears most clearly in Chapter 7's photo essay, where dressing habits, sensory recollections, and sartorial choices persist beyond their original purpose. Analytically, this form of memory supports the Body Dressing Work framework by framing dressing as durational labor rather than episodic experience.

Material memory is recollection activated, structured, and mediated through objects such as the garments and photographs discussed throughout this book. In Chapter 5 this is studied through examination of style and aspiration. In Chapter 7 garments are utilized as prompts for recall and analysis, family photographs are considered for their temporal anchoring of narrative, and clothing is considered as both record and constraint. Material memory positions remembrance as evidence and rejects the narrative becoming purely introspective autobiography.

Shared narratives, myths, and ideals shape how the past is understood and reproduced socio-politically, forming cultural memory (see Sturken, 1997; Kealy-Morris, 2025, 2026; Kealy-Morris and Porter, 2025). While it operates across the book, it is most clearly examined in Chapter 2 through American dress history, in Chapter 3 through suburban ideals, and in Chapter 5 through analyses of American styles and aspirations. The book demonstrates that cultural memory precedes individual lived experience, establishing normative expectations before personal aesthetics and tastes are independently formed.

Autobiographical memory, often referred to as “personal memory,” is first-person memory, deliberately structured and contextualized to describe life events from an individual perspective. This type of recollection is located within narrative moments between photographs in Chapter 7 and autoethnographic passages throughout the book set in italics. This form of memory does not function as proof in itself but instead creates access points for structural analysis by pointing toward the social, cultural, and material conditions that shape lived experience.

In this book, memory accumulates through repetition, endurance, and the gradual accumulation of experience over time, understood as temporal memory. In Chapter 7, it is made visible through repeated dressing practices, the steady establishment of anxiety, and vigilance around my clothed body during and after brace wear. Time, place, context, and memory underpin the book’s argument that style develops through the endurance of Body Dressing Work rather than through a single, momentous transformation.

Visual material, memory, and dressing labor

The photographs included in this book are not treated as illustrative supplements or nostalgic artefacts, but as analytic material through which the labor of dressing becomes traceable. Where photographs appear, they are understood both as objects commonly associated with memory and as visual practices that actively produce memory in the present—mechanisms through which the past is constructed, interpreted, and situated within contemporary understanding (Sturken, 1999). In this sense, photographs do not simply recall what has been; they participate in the ongoing work of meaning-making.

Family snapshots, in particular, are approached here as culturally dense images shaped by what Marianne Hirsch (1999) describes as a “familial looking”—a mode of viewing that renders familiar faces and scenes coherent, positive, and emotionally legible. Such images often function as screens through which norms of appearance, propriety, and belonging are established. In retrospect, however, they also reveal moments of tension and misfit, allowing the demands placed on bodies, and the work required to meet them, to be traced and made legible over time. In this book, family photographs do not stand as transparent records of personal history, but as sites where cultural expectation and lived experience intersect.

Attention is also paid to the material and temporal conditions under which photographs were produced and retained. Many of the personal images reproduced here date from the pre-digital era and were taken on film, printed, and kept as physical objects.