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CHAPTER EIGHT

'The American Look': Memories of Not Fitting In

Elizabeth Kealy-Morris

This chapter introduces the term 'body dressing work' to examine my experience negotiating the social norms and expectations of clothing a suburban American female body with the anxiety of living in a "deviant body" (Grimstad Klepp and Rysst 2016: 79) due to a spinal deformity. At the age of ten I was diagnosed with scoliosis, a curvature of the spine, and by eleven was prescribed a corrective orthotic that I wore twenty-three hours a day until the age of fourteen during the years 1978 to 1981. Memory is engaged with here as a constructed representation of the past which, although unstable and unreliable, is used by individuals and groups to produce meaning and makes sense of the world through signifying practices in the present (Hall 1997). Two disciplines of memory are applied: individual, personal memory (Ricoeur 2006) articulated via photographs and autoethnographic prose, and cultural memory.[1] The interwoven nature of history, memory, and popular culture comprising American cultural memory is examined through an analysis of 'The American Look',[2] the casual American style of sportswear and daywear.[3] Developed by American ready-to wear garment manufactures and their designers, this style emerged in the 1930s and 1940s and continues to dominate the nation's feminine silhouette today with the shift

[1] For more on autoethnography as a methodology and practice, see Reed-Danahay (1997), Neumann (1996), Ellis and Bochner (2000), Holman Jones (2005), Denzin (2006). For more on cultural memory, see Nora (1989), Halbwachs ([1950] 1980, 1992), Huyssen (1995), Sturken (1997), Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer (1999).

[2] For more on The American Look see Talmey (1946), Leach (1993), Webber-Hanchett (2003), Arnold (2009). The phrase was developed in the 1930s by marketing executive Dorothy Shaver (Talmey 1946; Leach 1993; Yohannan and Nolf 1999; Breward 2003; Webber-Hanchett 2003) at the upscale department store Lord & Taylor to promote the American fashion industry through encouraging middle-class American women to see themselves in the styles. See Campbell Warner (2010), Millbank (1989), and Yohannan (2010) for more on the ready-to-wear designers of this era.

[3] This chapter refers to 'sportswear' as distinct from 'active sportswear.' As Campbell Warner (2010: 648) notes, "sportswear concerns the fashionable aspects of clothing for sport rather than the athletic. Individual items such as jerseys, sweaters, and turtlenecks came directly out of active sports." The separate items of clothing are specifically designed to be mixed and matched in different combinations to create various outfits from the same garments and worn off the athletics field, tennis court, and golf range.

dress (Figure 8.1) encapsulating the style.[4] Previous ethnographic analysis of the shift dress' cultural significance in American middle-class suburban culture (Kealy-Morris 2018) is extended into a broader analysis of the style within America's cultural memory as a signifier of female youthful fitness and the cultural expectations of the female body (Arnold 2009). Through this analysis the chapter demonstrates the foundations of America's cultural memory of dress.

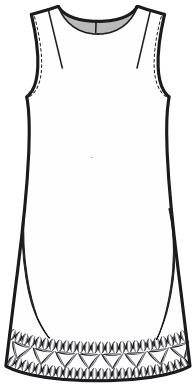

Figure 8.1. "60s Shift Dress", two-dimensional drawing via Computer Aided Design of the front of a sleeveless, yoke-necked shift dress © WGSN, 2022. Reproduced with permission.

Existing scholarly work on the links between embodied dress theory and the areas of disabled bodies, excluded bodies and the psychological consequences of not "fitting in" (Woodward 2005: 24) to the dress of one's social grouping will be further developed in this chapter.[5] Sophie Woodward's ethnographic study (2005) of the internal, environmental, and social motivations for developing an individual aesthetic style that meets cultural expectations is useful here. Through methods of personal memory and autoethnographic practice this concept is extended further, using the terms 'fitting in' and 'not fitting in' to refer to clothing, culture, and expectations of how a suburban girl's body should look and

[4] The shift dress is cut straight at the sides and unfitted at the waist in straight and A-line styles. It originated as daywear from the early part of the twentieth century known as a 'chemise' and became popular in the 1950s when luxury fashion design houses Dior and Balenciaga began experimenting with the style. Sometimes called a 'sack' or 'sheath' dress, from the 1960s straight-cut dresses have been commonly known as 'shifts' and since the 1980s the term has encompassed more silhouettes (Ward 2010).

[5] For embodied dress theory see Davis (1992), Craik (1993), Entwistle (2000), Woodward (2005, 2007), Miller and Woodward (2012). For disabled bodies see Buse and Twigg (2013), Hirsch ([1998] 2003), Garland-Thompson (2002), Linthicum (2006), Grimstad Klepp and Rysst (2016), Stauss (2020). For excluded bodies see Rothblum and Solovay (2009), Erdman Farrell (2011), Volonté (2022). For the psychological consequences of not fitting in to the dress styles of your social group see Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), Guy and Banim (2000), Tangney and Dearing (2002), Johnson, Lennon, and Rudd (2014), van der Kolk (2014), Mair (2018), Volonté (2022).

function. These terms will be linked to the negotiated effort encapsulated in body dressing work with the purpose to actively seek, test out, and find clothing that enables individuals to fit into social settings.

I will explore how a sense of shame (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Tangney and Dearing 2002; Mair 2018) and stigma (Goffman 1990a) can be internalized by those unable to wear key styles representing social group identity. This "failure" implies the inability to fit into both the garment and the normative culture it signifies (Goffman 1990a: 152). The concept of 'body dressing work' has been developed in recognition that dressing oneself is an everyday embodied material practice comprising a set of actions carried out and decisions made to manage what Fred Davis (1992: 24) terms our "ambivalent social identity" – whom we would like to be perceived as, rather than who we consider ourselves to be. As Davis notes, dress plays a key role in identity management due to its framing of our bodies and therefore its immediate representation of the self. Through memory work and autoethnographic practice, I reflect on the body dressing work I engaged in during the early years of wearing my brace which encompassed my pursuit of what Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward (2012: 150-1) describe as "ordinariness" to seek "inclusion rather than exclusion" through my dress choices. I further argue that the memory of not fitting in, and seeking ordinariness to blend in, can develop into learned lived practice via dress and possible numbing behaviors (van der Kolk 2014) as situated work involving the body. Throughout this chapter the reader will encounter autoethnographic passages of prose that appear in italics. These are interspersed to surprise and startle, and which aim to shift the reader's perception of both linguistic and visual communication.

Cultural Memory of American Dress

Cultural memory is an active process in which memory is produced through cultural products that circulate through popular culture and media; this chapter will focus on items produced within America's commercial fashion market. Specific to American culture and memory, Marita Sturken (1997) proposes, "cultural memory is a means through which definitions of the nation and 'Americanness' are simultaneously established, questioned and

reconfigured" (13). Her central point is that there is a shared materiality to this kind of remembering that is meaningful to a group's identity via official memorialization activity (i.e., via statues, parades, museum exhibitions, speeches, days of mourning) and popular culture (i.e., films, TV broadcasts, books, and commemorative souvenirs). I will argue that the shared materiality of the sportswear style of The American Look, and in particular the shift dress style, offers a representation of a national dress style American women and girls ought to fit into.

As this is an autoethnographic study I am interested in what Sturken (1997: 6) terms the "political nature of memory": who decides what representations of the past should enter the public domain? The French philosopher and cultural theorist Michel Foucault's ([1975] 1980: 82) notion of "subjugated knowledge" is useful in order to deepen an understanding of what is at stake in defining the function, practices, traditions, and memorializing of my suburban Northeastern American hometown. Foucault (1975, [1975] 1980) was interested in the knowledge of the unheard, unrepresented, and unacknowledged in society such as the patient and the prisoner whose experiences and voices are not included in official records of history or memory. Foucault termed the memory of those without access to official representation as "popular memory" (1975: 25) and noted that power struggles take place between official and popular memory to determine which will be recognized and acknowledged.

I experienced "identity ambivalence" (Davis 1992: 25) and anxiety regarding who I was and where I belonged long before I began wearing the brace. I was a middle-class child from a large extended working-class family living in an upper-middle-class, comfortable, and safe suburb that was known regionally as a representation of "The American Dream" (Adams 1931: 404).[6] I felt odd to my friends – the daughters and sons of professionals – and I felt odd to relatives who lived a long drive away. The town's cultural mythology conveys residents are lucky to live there, and any negative experiences are the fault of the individual; this left me in awe and silence, and anxious to fit in. Aligned with Reed-Danahay's (1997)

[6] Adams created this phrase in his 1931 populist bestseller *The Epic of America* which refers to the dream of homeownership. Attached to this socio-economic status were the attributes of being an upstanding, responsible, respectable citizen. See also Gallagher (2013).

notion of the counter-narrative within the autoethnographic framework is Foucault's (1975: 25) use of the term "counter-memory" to represent memories that resist official memory. I have developed a "counternarrative" (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9) which is expressed in autoethnographic prose through which I analyze my life experiences as self-described evidence rather than a set of archived official truths. In doing so, this practice creates a legitimized space for the voice of my eleven- to fourteen-year-old self.

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It is a very sunny and hot day in July 1978. I am 11 years old. I am now familiar with the doctor's office in the pediatric orthopedic department in Boston Children's Hospital: 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 doctor arrives, he sits on his desk facing my mother and I; he towers over us. He delivers his verdict which at the time is a life sentence: my spinal curve (idiopathic scoliosis) has grown to the unacceptable amount of twenty-three degrees, and I will now be fitted for the Boston Orthopedic Brace (Figure 8.2) to wear twenty-three hours a day to correct this deformity.[7]

I find out that day that I have an untrustworthy body; a body that reflects 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 given 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 no longer fit into the clothes of my peers: I wear odd tent pinafores my mother sews at home for me to hide where the brace protrudes (Figure 8.3).

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[7] The categorization of my type of brace as a 'Boston brace' was an official medical typological one referring to an orthotic for a spinal curve in the mid to lower vertebrae. It was coincidence that I was a patient at Boston Children's Hospital when prescribed this type of orthotic.

Figure 8.2. The author's braces: Right was her first one, fitted at age 11, 1978; Left was her second and final, fitted at age c. 13, c. 1980-81. Author's own photograph.

Figure 8.3. Author (far left) in a home sewn pinafore, aged 12, April 1979. Author's own photograph. Reproduced with permission.

American Cultural Memory: The National Myths

This section will discuss American national myths that I argue have defined what 'Americanness' is and how it is represented. I will show the influence these myths have had on the development of The American Look sportswear style and its enduring power to reproduce itself in contemporary markets. As argued elsewhere (Kealy-Morris 2021), there are four fundamental beliefs held in official history and what Foucault (1975: 25) termed "popular memory" which have impacted on American cultural memory and the development of a national identity and myth. These beliefs have profound implications on the American body politic and the dressed body corpus. These include the analysis of The Myth of Revolution and "the patriot" developed by American historian Catherine Albanese

(1976: 8);[8] Manifest Destiny (Scholnick 2005; Walker Howe 2007);[9] the frontier as shaper of the American character (Turner 1893);[10] and the constitutional belief in the Right to Liberty.[11] At the heart of these powerful myths lie the rejection of European influence on American religion, culture, political interference through insurrection and revolution, and later territorial control of the North American continent. With these concepts and myths, the development of American cultural memory can be seen through "the interaction of individuals in the creation of cultural meaning … [and] cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history" (Sturken 1997: 1). American historian John Bodnar (1992) notes that the enduring symbols of 'pioneer' and 'patriot' are both powerful in America because they both serve civic and vernacular interests, negotiated for meaning locally and nationally. Indeed, he notes, the pioneer symbol originated in the attempts of local communities and ethnic groups to mark and remember their cultural origins as more recent settlers. While various interests are bound up in these symbols, cultural negotiation is clearly playing out in the development of cultural memory here.

The stereotype of the pioneer woman, her spirit, and her dress were a great influence on my pre-brace childhood through the popularity of Laura Ingalls Wilder's autobiographical book series *Little House on the Prairie*, first published in 1934 and reprinted in the early 1970s. These were the first novel-length books I owned, and I read them repeatedly. The main character, Ingalls Wilder herself, was smart, curious, spirited, and, as a result, frequently in trouble like me. The book series was later broadcast on national television from 1974, bringing the myth of the pioneer firmly into popular culture, beyond hyper-masculine Western battle dramas, to include women, family, and community life on the

[8] Albanese (1976) writes about the enduring myths that succeeded in the development a successful army of 'patriots' to wage a successful revolution against England which is the basis for the development of "Civil Religion" in America and "patriot thought" which has created a new unique national truth to live by (8).
[9] Manifest Destiny was a phrase that promoted continental expansion, resulting in a doubling of American territory in four years. It continues to influence popular culture and memory through the notion of the shaping of the nation's psyche via links to the frontier (Walker Howe 2007).
[10] The popular myth of the frontier romantically suggests that with the exploration, mapping, and setting down of communication lines to develop new settlements in land west of the original thirteen colonies, a set of American character traits were forged, including "restless, nervous energy, dominant individualism … humor, bravery, and rude strength" (Turner 1893 [online]).
[11] The Right to Liberty is an American constitutional principle of individual autonomy which can be summarized as 'my body, my choice.'

American frontier.[12] Wearing blankets as capes, my friends and I dressed like pioneer girls as best we could while play-acting the stories in each other's houses, each of us taking turns to play our heroine Laura. The Ingalls family's frontier experiences, communicated through popular culture, promoted the myth of pioneer women's spirit, grit, determination, intelligence, bodily strength, bravery, moral fortitude, and resilience. Through my exposure to these pioneer stories, and enacting them through play, I formed a strong sense of the American woman I ought to become.

The American Look: Designing a National Style

The myths and symbols of patriots and pioneers free from colonial rule, forging a new nation and working their own land, is woven into the development of a popular early sportswear style: The American Look. Design Historian Rebecca Arnold (2008, 2009) notes that the sensible, affordable, and practical clothing produced by the New York fashion industry matched the informal and active nature of modern American life. While Parisian couture brands Chanel and Patou created sport-inspired fashions for the young elite, it was American ready-to-wear designers who shaped the ideal of simplified, modernized affordable styles for middle- and working-class women with cost-conscious, easy to launder fabrics.

Sportswear marketers sought to attribute American principles of democracy, freedom of movement, and healthiness to the New York sportswear style which aligned to the rise of the idealized vision of the independent "Modern Woman" (Arnold 2009: 30).[13] Visuality of the American modern woman was apparent in the modernist aesthetic of 1930s fashion photography, magazines, and popular films. Popular visual culture in the forms of photography, cinema, and fashion magazines encouraged women to train their bodies through dance and exercise (Arnold 2008). As early as the 16 February 1929 issue of *Vogue,*

[12] Ingalls Wilder, L. ([1934] 1953), *Little House on the Prairie Series*, New York: Harper & Row; *Little House on the Prairie*, (1974-1982) [TV Series], NBC.
[13] For further discussion on cultural memory relating to American dress see Atkin's chapter in this volume as well as Breward (2003: 110-11) and Fleetwood (2005). For further discussion on the American drive for cleanliness and hygiene as a patriotic duty, see Arnold (2009: 48-49).

the beauty and grace of dancers' bodies was discussed with encouragement to readers to emulate their silhouette and to explore the shift from private to public space. Arnold (2008: 345) notes, "exercise developed women's figures, and was a part of a cultural shift towards viewing movement as a quintessentially modern aspect of (feminine) identity." As dancers, actresses and fashion models, young women living in New York City were the first to take advantage of the freedom of movement that modern dance and innovative fashion offered. During the Depression era (1929-38) department stores, magazines, and manufacturers sought to appeal to customers' patriotism to lure them away from French fashions. This was done by creating direct connections between the New York-based sportswear designers and the stores' customers through marketing campaigns and magazine articles which suggested only American designers would understand the fashion needs and desires of the American woman (Arnold 2009). The American Look, led by Dorothy Shaver at the Lord & Taylor department store, became such a campaign which was curated through carefully executed marketing during the late 1930s and mid 1940s.[14] Figure 8.4 illustrates the astute creative direction of the campaign in a full-page advertisement in the May 1945 edition of American *Vogue*. A warm invitation is conveyed to middle-class American women to see themselves and their lives represented in the style using hand-drawn type, engaging populist storytelling in an easy-to-read modernist san-serif typeface which is set in the cadence of a poem. The advertisement is illustrated by an informal watercolor in the style of luxury print-based fashion promotions contemporary to the times.

Figure 8.4. "You can thank your ancestors for The American Look", Lord & Taylor Advertisement promoting The American Look © Lord & Taylor, 1945. Reproduced with permission.

[14] Talmey (1946), Leach (1993), Yohannan and Nolf (1999), Breward (2003), Webber-Hanchett (2003).

The American aesthetic of natural and unadorned beauty can be located in what is today still recognized as the classic minimalist style of Katherine Hepburn, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly which we see in the contemporary collections of DKNY, Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, Halston, Tom Ford, Tory Burch, and Kate Spade. Figure 8.5 is a shift dress worn by the First Lady of the United States, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, the wife of the then president, John F. Kennedy, during a high-level official state visit to India in 1962. Bouvier Kennedy's choice of this new style during a diplomatic tour, as the woman with the greatest responsibility to represent American womanhood, demonstrates the status of the style at the time. The dress has been preserved and archived in the John F. Kennedy Museum in Boston, Massachusetts, as a symbol of his presidency. This is a good example of the cultural memory of dress: the weaving together of culture, history, memory, and the clothing that represents this entanglement. It is this American aesthetic which I lived with from the age of six to the age of eighteen in the 1980s when preppy dress was the dominant style of the suburban town's mothers and daughters: button-down Oxford blouses, chino pants with embroidered d-loop belts, and the shift dress.[15] Even if my family were able to afford the preppy style, I would not have been able to wear it as my brace would have been fully exposed: the shift dress, for example, would have been as revealing of the protrusions of the brace's orthotic restraints as if I were wearing a negligée.

Figure 8.5. Shift dress in pink silk shantung with four large covered buttons down the side, MO 63.1261. Worn by Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, First Lady of the United States, 1962. Collection of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston © John F. Kennedy Library Foundation. Reproduced with permission.

[15] The origins of the preppy style dates to early twentieth century sportswear clothing worn by wealthy young American men at their private preparatory ('prep') schools prior to entering elite male-only colleges (the 'Ivy League' colleges). Tuite (2014) notes that by the mid-1930s young American women began to copy and develop their own adaptations to the style at their exclusive female-only colleges (the 'Seven Sisters' colleges). For more on the preppy style see Salk (2007) and Banks and de La Chapelle (2011).

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Good American suburban girls have bodies that work properly – they play tennis and swim and play soccer. Their bodies are just the right size for the correct suburban uniform in the early 1980s: shift dresses, chinos, cable knit sweaters, Oxford button down shirts and loafers. This uniform is linear and masculine and hipless. Even when, at sixteen, finally rid of my orthopedic brace and working very hard to self-discipline my body, I have wide hips and big feet that don't fit in the uniform; I am reminded that I don't fit, still.

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The Shift Dress: Memories of Not Fitting In

Two memories of wearing my brace twenty-three hours a day from age eleven to fourteen have stayed with me: being in constant pain from the tightness of the orthotic and the daily anxiety of getting dressed; I couldn't fit into the clothes of my peers because of the shape of my body in the brace and therefore I could not fit in with my peers. Here I consider the body dressing work I engaged in to carefully develop a wardrobe full of what Miller and Woodward (2012: 63) term "ordinary" clothing to seek cover in my quest to fit into an American culture which celebrates strong, healthy bodies that are ready for the frontier, the field, or the dancefloor. Alison Guy and Maura Banim (2000) argue that women have an active relationship between their clothes and their identities. One self-view is "the woman I fear I could be," reflecting the anxieties women reported regarding their wardrobes and their possible sartorial errors which could affect their relationships with others (Guy and Banim 2000: 313). For some women this anxiety culminated into viewing certain clothes as representations of the woman they feel they must hide from view. This supports my own experience: my greatest fear was that the exposure of my brace would mean ostracization from my social group, therefore my body dressing work involved taking great care in which garments I selected and rejected.

The shift dress has evolved to allow for a choice of silhouettes from unfitted loose dresses to more body-conscious figure-hugging styles (Ward 2010). Though updated, it remains an essential part of the American woman's wardrobe as it signifies understated feminine youthful health by accommodating full body movement and casual ease. The shift dress was further embedded into popular culture by the socialite Lilly Pulitzer, who introduced her 'Lilly Dress' (Figure 8.6) at her orange juice bar in the upmarket resort of Palm Beach, Florida (Banks and de La Chapelle 2011).

Figure 8.6. "Pulitzer Fashions: The young matrons of Palm Beach, wearing designs by Lilly Pulitzer" © Slim Aarons/Getty Images, 1964. Reproduced with the permission of Getty Images. *[Placeholder only, awaiting final copy, see the manuscript's Artwork Permission Table for more information]*

The Lilly Dress is noted for its bright colors and playful fabrics and remains a summer staple for female residents, young and old, of upper-middle-class towns like my suburban hometown. Banks and de La Chapelle (2011: 168) write that "Lillys are an eternal reminder that 'it's always summer somewhere.'" Figure 8.6 is an image taken by society photographer Slim Aaron for a lifestyle photoshoot of Lilly Pulitzer's friends and their daughters at poolside in Palm Beach wearing variations of the Lilly Dress. In *Celebrating WASP Style: A Privileged Life*, Susanna Salk (2007: 104-5) captions the photograph as "Ladies in Palm Beach decked out in their Lilly Pulitzer shifts look as youthful as their daughters." A semiotic analysis (following Barthes 1977) of the shift dress as a sartorial sign producing negotiated cultural meaning would suggest its signifiers are a garment worn by females which is manufactured in a light fabric, has a high scooped neck, loose without a waist, nor any external restraint at the waist, and exposes all limbs to sight. The dress and the lifestyle merge together strongly in this photograph and its captions: what is signified is youthful, active, healthy female bodies, confidently soaking up the sun with their limbs exposed. The sign 'shift dress' loses the signifier of 'comfort for warm climates' to gain the signified 'stylish piece of clothing to wear by body-confident, youthful, healthy, women.' Therefore, the signified, connoted negotiated cultural meaning communicated about the shift dress is that the wearer of the dress takes on the signifiers herself: she is full of feminine youthful confidence through the healthy summer activity she engages in.

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It's a spring day, my mother and I are shopping in a boutique in the neighboring suburban town. I have just turned thirteen. The trip is not going well. My mother is bored, I am anxious. Tension hangs in the air. She wants me to buy clothes that cover my brace without trace, I want stylish clothes that will allow me to fit in with my friends even if it means the outline of the brace can be seen. I try on garment after garment, and I stand my ground. It is navy blue with a grandfather collar,[16] *it is a light rayon-mix fabric and has tinsel-like threads sewn in so that in the light it shines. This reminds me of disco, a music genre I have grown to love, with Donna Summer's 'Bad Girls' being the first album I bought with my own money.*[17] *I remember the smell of the blouse and how, somehow, the smell never goes away regardless of how many times it is washed … a grown up musky floral scent; I'm not yet allowed to wear perfume, so this smell is very exciting. I think of the boy I like in my Social Studies class; I wonder if he will like me in the blouse. I am hopeful.*

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[16] This is the American term for the collarless "grandad shirt" (Breward 2004: 178).
[17] Summer, D. (1979), *Bad Girls*, Casablanca.

Body Dressing Work: Visibility and Cover

After that July day in 1978 when, at the age of eleven, I was fitted for my first Boston brace, I was never again to achieve the mythical attributes that the shift dress supposedly imbued within its wearer: feminine youthful confidence through healthy summer activity. Carolyn Mair's (2018) discussion of social identity theory is helpful here. Feeling good about membership in social groups is important to a positive self-concept and clothing enables us to affiliate with our clique and disassociate ourselves from others. Feedback from others influences our self-concepts and self-esteem, and these are interrelated. My body had become "a social barrier … a deviant body" (Grimstad Klepp and Rysst 2016: 85) because I was unable to wear a key sartorial staple of my social grouping due to my anxiety at exposing my deformity and the fear of subsequent social exclusion.

Joanne Entwistle (2000) notes that dress can be a source of shame as well as a method for avoiding it. She suggests that the sense of shame is a social one, not simply focused on the garments themselves, but rather related to not having met the standards expected within a social space with a defined moral code of conduct expected of participants. My brace did not allow me to "pass" as healthy (Goffman 1990a: 153) and the outline of the orthotic, and the way it distorted my movements, was apparent to everyone. I was very aware there was a peculiarity to my body which no cloth could conceal. I sought ordinariness in my dress to reduce visibility and cover my abnormality to minimize the visibility of my stigma so that my deformity did not disrupt relationships with my peers. I carried out body dressing work to fit into the expectations of the clothed body of a suburban girl. Dressing my deformed body and covering my unseen brace was complicated, contradictory, stressful, and worrying because I had few options; the body dressing work had to be deliberate and intentional, and based on trial-and-error testing.

As I had already accepted that I couldn't pass for a normal suburban girl and hiding the orthotic was causing me great anxiety, I wanted my peers to know why I moved so robotically. I had fantasies of wearing the 'Milwaukee brace' like the title character in Judy

Blume's (1973) young adult novel *Deenie* who had a higher curve on her spine and therefore her brace protruded above her collar for all to see.[18] This is a secret I never told anyone. My curve is mid-spine so I was prescribed the rib-cage crunching 'Boston brace' (Figure 8.2). I walked oddly, I sat oddly, I moved oddly, but no one knew exactly why. I imagined the whispers, and I saw the doubt in my classmates' eyes, which, in my mind, said, "Is she ok to be around? Or is she weak and strange and will ruin my chances with other kids in the class?" I remember thinking, "If I wore Deenie's brace everyone would know it is just my body that's crooked, not *all* of me." I sought dress that would allow me ordinariness and cover. Through body dressing work I used dress as "a central part in the on-going, day-to-day negotiation of self" (Buse and Twigg 2013: 328). This involves a process of choosing, negotiating, and wearing clothing for particular purposes that are consciously understood to construct and perform our identities, a "presentation of the self" (Goffman 1990b: 244; see also Entwistle 2000; Buse and Twigg 2013).

By age twelve I rejected the homemade pinafore (Figure 8.3) and the shift dress (Figures 8.1 and 8.5) for the store-bought ready-to-wear separates of the light blue jersey blouse and light blue calico peasant skirt seen in Figure 8.7. This skirt, just visible on the bottom right of the photograph, became one my most treasured garments. I felt beautiful and grown-up wearing it – when no one was looking I would twirl and twirl, loving the way the skirt billowed out, allowing me to forget my brace for a few moments. This clothing was socially acceptable for a middle-class girl in suburban Northeastern America in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The outline of my brace can be seen in the blouse, but the jersey material was more flexible and thicker than that of a shift dress, fully covered my back, and the longer sleeves meant my protective t-shirt was hidden. I chose not to wear the pinafores, which were home sewn by my mother, because they were not the style of my in-group, they were not to a retail finish, and I felt childish in them. At the other end of the spectrum, I chose not to not wear the shift dress as it would not have closed the shame gap (Entwistle 2000; Goffman 1990a): the high back of my brace (Figure 8.2) would have protruded the thin, stiff cotton/linen mix in very strange ways. In addition, the t-shirts I

[18] Blume, J. (1973), *Deenie*, New York: Bradbury Press. For more information on the Milwaukee brace, see Physiopedia (2022). Available online: https://www.physio-pedia.com/Milwaukee_brace (accessed 22 March 2022).

wore to protect my skin from the orthotic constantly rubbing against my skin would have ruined the clean lines of the sleeveless shift dress style. I remember feeling that my failure to meet expectations of a healthy body would have been the focus of every social encounter if I wore the shift dress; I sought belonging, not exceptionalism. I walked a very fine line in my body dressing work to find clothing that fit my brace, my body, and my peers' sartorial expectations.

Figure 8.7. Author in store-bought clothes with the outline of the brace evident at her ribcage, aged 12, June 1979. Author's own photograph.

June Tangney and Ronda Dearing (2002) note that shame often generates a longing to escape or hide and can be further extended when we link our own negative beliefs of ourselves with the fear of exposure from others (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). My body was a danger to who I wanted to be (Guy and Banim 2000) so I kept it hidden, out of sight, away from notice. With my choice of dress, I was not concerned with the appearance of my body but rather I sought to perform the social identity and stereotype of what an American suburban girl should be. As noted by Davis (1992: 25), because clothing is draped upon the body, "dress … comes easily to serve as a kind of visual metaphor for identity, and … for registering the culturally anchored ambivalences that resonate within and among identities." This reflects my experience: my memories of shame of my disfigurement, social fear, and anxiety of possible exclusion by my peers, are culturally specific within the body discourse of middle-class American suburbia in the late 1970s to early 1980s.

I want to end looking to the future of a productive dialogue and discourse between dress theory and feminist disability theory where the praxis might be less about the shape of bodies and more about how beautifully unique bodies are engaged in body dressing work,

the everyday negotiation of the self. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002: 21) states, "disability is perhaps the essential characteristic of being human. The body is dynamic, constantly interactive with history and environment. We evolve into disability." This mirrors the findings of Buse and Twigg (2013) who have found that the choosing of clothing and the act of dressing remains important for the identities of those living with dementia. Locating clothes that fit and are suitable is key to self-acceptance, self-confidence, and a sense of inclusion into one's social grouping. The experience of identity ambivalence continues for me. I have come to understand that I experienced being braced at eleven, and the acute social anxiety I felt living in a disabled body, as an "Adverse Childhood Trauma" (van ker Kolk 2014: 173). The development of the term 'body dressing work' has been important in developing an understanding of the sense of deviance I still feel: we are all experiencing a continuum in our social interactions between our desired and actual selves and everyday dress practices are key to this negotiation.

Conclusion

This chapter recognizes that dressing the body is an embodied, experiential, situated, everyday practice involving negotiation and purposeful activity. Within dress theory there is much critical analysis of choices made to wear clothing, and much less on the exclusion from clothing with physically and socially acceptable fit for the disabled. The purpose of this chapter has been to establish an extension to dress theory to encompass the experience of dressing disabled bodies and to recognize the psychological consequences of not fitting into the dress of one's social grouping. The concept of 'body dressing work' has been introduced to recognize the negotiated effort to actively seek, test out, and find clothing that enables individuals to fit into social settings through careful clothing of the body. The autoethnographic prose narrating personal memories of not fitting into the dress of my peers articulates the structures of marginalization that operate within everyday dress practices. These autoethnographic passages bring authenticity and significance to the suggestion that the practice of body dressing work could be further recognized, discussed, and explored within embodied dress theory as well as other disciplines including garment design, product design, prosthetic design, disability studies, and behavioral psychology. More participatory action research and memory-based research projects together with the

disabled would enable articulation of memories, experiences, and body dressing work practices to include their voices and bodies in the framing of inclusive solutions to this challenging subject.

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