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Fashioning the sixties: fashion narratives of older women

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ABSTRACT
The popular media suggest that we are witnessing 'a fashion for older women' and that 'the latest new faces to light up campaigns and covers' are retirees (*The Guardian*, 16 September 2012). Do fashion designers know this? On the one hand, Sir Christopher Frayling, former Rector of the Royal College of Art in the United Kingdom, observes that we need a change in mind-set for the art school of the future since design students' attitudes to designing for older people is that it is really boring ('Start the Week', BBC Radio 4, 19 November 2012). On the other hand, the sculptor Antony Gormley states that 'Art schools are the things that reinforce agency in the world'. This paper emerges out of an ongoing conversation between a group of women friends about how they feel about clothes and the fashion choices on offer to them. The women constitute a sub-group of women in their sixties who grew up in the 1960s, against a background of 'cultural revolution' in British fashion that emerged out of the art schools.

KEY WORDS – clothes, ageing, class, gender, identity, auto-ethnography.

Introduction

Twigg (2012*a*) suggests that the spread of fashion opportunities to older women entails the colonisation of their bodies by new expectations, new requirements – ones that demand that they be fashionable or well dressed, but present the body in such a way that age is as far as possible effaced (*see also* Twigg 2012*b*) – while Clarke and Miller (2002) cite anxiety as a defining feature of women's relationships to fashion. The stories and pictures presented here constitute an auto-ethnographic narrative of fashioning the self that examines the author's relationship to clothes and traces the development of 'style identities' in dress which rests on creative practices such as looking, picturing, shopping, copying, making, borrowing, assembling, *etc.* Does fashion efface one's age or enhance one's

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agency? Here, despite some frustrations, a more positive picture is painted than that suggested by some other academic accounts.

The stories begin with a single auto-ethnographic account which traces the defining influences on one woman's relationship with clothes, fashion, style and ageing from her grandmother's time to her own later life, examining via key events the part clothes played in the constitution of identity through the lifecourse. In later life, naturally occurring conversations with her female peers revealed a shared sense of a growing loss of the aesthetic, cultural and material pleasure and stimulation which had been afforded by an engagement with clothes during their earlier lives. In order to investigate this more formally, their 'fashion narratives' were collected via videoed in-depth interviews, the thematic analysis of which then formed the basis of a documentary film.[1] Following the single account presented here, the article goes on to draw on data from the film to examine women's personal relationships to clothes in older age and to explore the problem Shilling (2011) identifies: 'how to carry on looking like me'. We might extend the question further to incorporate fully embodied notions of identity: not only how to carry on looking like but also feeling like and being me. In place of 'representativeness' and 'generalisability', narratives offer a springboard for discussion, an opportunity for others to identify similarities and differences in their own lives, experiences and relationships to clothes and ageing.

Take a girl like you

It is the late 1920s

A little girl is growing up in a village, in a 'two-up, two-down'[2] in the middle of a row of terraced houses down the road from a farm (Figure 1).

Every year she goes to the party held for local children by the village teacher – the unmarried daughter of the local land-owning family who lives in the 'Big House' further down the street (Figure 2).

For some reason, the girl's eldest brother is the frequent object of their father's ill-temper. One day, when he is 14, he discovers what he thinks is the explanation – he is not his father's son and was born illegitimately. He runs away, broadcasting the news to the village at large as an act of revenge on his 'bogus' father. He doesn't anticipate the repercussions for his sister. The teacher tells her in front of the rest of the class that she will never amount to anything. She tells her that she will doubtless end up in the gutter, coming from 'stock like that'. The little girl never attends the annual party again.

Figure 1. Chellaston village, Derby, UK.

Figure 2. 'The Big House', Chellaston, Derby, UK.

It is the late 1940s

A young married woman dresses up her two daughters in white satin hand-smocked dresses of the kind worn by the 'little princesses' Elizabeth and Margaret and with her husband in tow, walks across the fields to the Big House in a nearby village and bangs on the door. She reminds the woman who opens it of a long-ago conversation. She holds out her hand to show her wedding ring. She presents her beautifully dressed daughters. She invites the woman to 'look at her now'.

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Figure 3. 'The Shop'.

It is the 1950s

A little girl, whose big sisters have already started school, spends all her time in her father's butcher' shop (Figure 3), observing the customers coming and going, listening to conversations about what they can give their husbands for tea, noticing how Mrs Sheehan, who always wears a head scarf tied bandanna-style around her curlers, talks differently somehow to Mrs McMahon who *never* wears curlers out of doors and tells stories about her famous show-jumping son Paddy.[3]

She is aware that her mother likes certain customers and doesn't like others. She knows that her mother likes 'nice things'. She knows before having the words to articulate it or being able to explain why, that 'good' clothes are important. She has seen photographs of her mother as a young woman looking rather stylish (Figure 4).

And she remembers being dressed up in the same satin smocked dresses that her mother made for her, just as she had done for her older sisters (Figure 5).

She has also inherited from them the wool plaid kilt-skirt with straps that she starts school in (Figures 6 and 7).

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Figure 4. The Mother.

She is not sent to her local school but to a newly built school where the Head of Infants is the lady from the Big House. On Sundays, she wears a wool coat with a velvet collar, purchased from a children's outfitters. She likes the feel of the collar (Figure 8).

She likes the feel of her mother's fur coat too, especially when she snuggles up against it on her mother's lap in the passenger seat of the car and falls asleep on the journeys home from family days out. Clothes are tactile.

She has been spared the elocution lessons her older sisters attended, but commits to memory one of the poems they recite at home: 'I'm going to sweep the dirt away – Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!' She doesn't yet recognise this as the *leitmotif* of her mother's life. A few years later, like her older sisters before her, she accompanies her mother into customers' homes on the weekly delivery round, listening to the tenor of their stories of marriage and motherhood, miscarriages and illnesses, developing in the process a finely tuned ear and a nuanced understanding not only of

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Figure 5. Satin smocked dress.

women's domestic lives but of the ways they present themselves to the world in private and in public.

It is the 1960s

A pre-adolescent girl watches enviously as one sister listens to Frank Sinatra as she changes from her 'pencil skirt' into trews and a 'Sloppy Joe' and as the other dons a full-skirted brocade dress for the evening, before heading off for the Locarno [ballroom] to dance the night away to Elvis or to haunt a local jazz club. She is growing up but her mother still chooses her clothes. She is happy with this because at the age of 12 she thinks she looks 'sophisticated' with her hair up, wearing a 'costume' and little white gloves – even while she is still happy to hold hands in public with her big sister (Figure 9).

A few years later, school trips to France and Italy add to the acquisition of a sensibility which is a mixture of sophistication and 'cool' – Françoise Hardy; Jean-Paul Belmondo; Vespas; her own purchase, from a shop near the Trevi Fountain, of the soft leather ballet pumps that all the Italian girls seem to be wearing. In a while, she is no longer trying on her sisters' clothes when they are out. She is listening to the Beatles and wearing a Patti Boyd 'Dollyrocker' dress. She reaches the last two years of school and is into 'Op Art'. Now that a new rule allows her and her friends to abandon uniform and wear their own clothes for school, the dress-making

Figure 6. Plaid kilt-skirts.

skills that her mother has passed on to her come into their own. She makes the 'mini' version of a Mary Quant 'A-line' dress in fine black wool with a white collar on its scoop neck (Butterick 3287). Her father says of the mini, 'That's not a skirt, it's a pelmet!'

She wears it, with opaque white lace tights and black 'tap'-style shoes with a floppy silk bow tied across the front instead of a button strap, to one of the rare parties her mother allows her to go to. Now friends come round occasionally to listen to records and, on one occasion, to exchange clothes. She swaps a home-made button-through silk shift-dress with pin-tucks down the front that she wears with white daisy earrings, for her best friend's navy and white sprigged cotton 'granny print' smock dress with a white lace Peter Pan collar. Her mother is incandescent – her friend has apparently 'exploited' her in some way she doesn't understand.

Figure 7. Plaid kilt-skirts.

Figure 8. Velvet collar.

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Figure 9. Big sister.

In London, the sixties are swinging. But in provincial Derby, her life remains heavily circumscribed by her mother's fears of being contaminated afresh by moral turpitude. She is studying 'A' level Art and attends the local art college once a week to do life drawing. (Her mother says 'Is that really necessary?') In contradiction of her mother's earlier aspirations, this youngest daughter's thoughts of going to university represent a step too far. It is high time she earns a living and tips her 'board'[4] over.

It is the late 1960s

A young woman attends two interviews to study Sociology at the University of Durham.[5] Her father has fought her corner and won. At the departmental

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interview, the male interviewer tests her knowledge of social class. What are some of its indicators? She talks about appearance – the way people present themselves in dress and speech. These are the wrong answers. She is finally prompted, with ill-concealed disdain, to consider occupation. She doesn't know that growing up in a shop and going out 'on the rounds'[6] has taught her to 'read' class and gender even if she hasn't acquired the sociological tools to put them into a wider structural context. In any case, contemporary sociological analyses of class count women out – women are still hidden inside 'households' whose heads they are not. Feminism hasn't reached her – or the sociology departments of the North-East – yet, and neither has Bourdieu. The establishment of Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham is still in its infancy, and she comes away understanding that her focus on how people look and how they talk is shallow and superficial. Later, her experience in this interview will be brought to mind by reading Hanley's (2016) account of 'flying solo in blissful ignorance' at her interview at Christ's College, Cambridge.

It is the end of the 1960s

At Newcastle University, a young sociology undergraduate is beginning to acquire the language of class that provides a key to understanding family, schooling and work – although it doesn't really accommodate her own experience of gender. She spends a disproportionate amount of her time browsing in Fenwicks department store and a disproportionate amount of her grant on dress fabric. She returns home at the end of the first term and meets up with her old classmates at a Christmas party. She is wearing: a red suede coat and a floppy brimmed hat over a home-made mini-dress and knee length red leather boots. Her ex-classmates say Wow! Back in Newcastle, she moves in with a bunch of Fine Art students. She stays on to do a post-graduate qualification in social work. She extends the reading list and discovers Erik Fromm, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Carl Rogers – and Ruth Etchells, from down the road at Durham. She is excited – who wouldn't be – when still strenuously trying to become a person in one's own right, by such titles as 'The Fear of Freedom', 'I and Thou', 'The Courage to Be', 'On Becoming a Person', 'Unafraid to Be'? They provide a second key to making sense of the world.

Alongside a largely unrequited love affair with one of the artists, who introduces her to Kurt Schwitters, Wittgenstein, Rilke and Erik Satie, and tells her to 'wear something nice' when he takes her one night to the opera, she continues her love affair with art. Somewhere along the way, she acquires a postcard of a Hockney painting depicting the fashion designer Ossie Clark and textile designer Celia Birtwell. She is vaguely aware of links between the worlds of art and fashion. She leaves university with the

knowledge that, for her, clothes play a central role in the fashioning of the self and that the work they do is a mixture of the performance of class, gender, creativity and self-expression.

It is the mid-1970s

A young woman gets married. She makes a white cotton dress with embroidered flowers. She updates the five-point haircut she had in the 1960s, as modelled by Grace Coddington, with a Purdy-style[7] 'bob'.

It is the beginning of the 1980s

A woman somewhat belatedly becomes a mother. Somewhat belatedly, and perhaps not coincidentally, she also catches up with feminism. It provides a third key – to understanding her experiences of gender and identity politics. She reads Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*. She understands that Steedman's mother's desire for the 'New Look' – what that style signalled, what it bestowed, what 'hidden injuries' (Sennett and Cobb 1972) it might heal – comes into all three of the black boxes whose keys she has tentatively held – boxes containing the classed self, the authentic self, the gendered self. She is still making her own clothes: culottes and a jacket made from beautiful quality deep-black linen bought in Siena; a wide shirt with epaulettes from a Wendy Dagworthy pattern; a trousers, tunic and jacket ensemble from an Issey Miyake pattern (Vogue Individualist 1693).

Fashion is less a way of signalling the middle-class status going to university has conferred on her (although it inevitably does that) but of seeking to express a degree of individualism, even if she is unavoidably reading and making reference to others' ideas and designs.

It is the noughties

A woman who used to be a Probation Officer has become an academic researcher. As her children grow up she has a little more disposable income. Still, she has to wait for the end of the sales to purchase beautiful one-off items of clothing – that the shop assistants refer to as 'pieces' – by Shirin Guild, Ivan Grundahl, Terry Macey, Sarah Pacini. She mixes them with cheaper items, from mainstream retailers, markets, charity shops. She discovers more affordable labels: Sahara, Masai, Sandwich. Increasingly her choices are of continental design, and seem to share a number of elements: interesting shapes or detailing, occasionally asymmetric cuts, beautiful fabrics unobtainable in the few remaining fabric shops she can find,

unusual textures, subtle colours. Their creators tend to utilise the discourse of the artist to describe them. Amy de la Haye, dress historian, curator and one-time creative consultant to Shirin Guild, talks about the designer's 'loose fluid layers, square shapes' and 'modern reductivist aesthetic'.

It is 2011

A woman retires and re-discovers the joys of dress-making. She still loves black and white but is inspired by Desigual's use of colour and Vivienne Westwood's use of pattern to make a short evening dress from a remnant of textured satin curtain fabric picked up for three pounds at an antiques fair. She starts to do the things she hasn't managed to fit in for a long time. She goes to the Yohji Yamamoto exhibition at the V&A, which sends her into paroxysms of delight as she walks round and round the exhibits, smiling inanely and trying to work out how they are constructed. If the yards and yards of fabric needed for the 'New Look' was what Steedman's mother sought, and if her older sisters' satin smocked dresses were a badge of 'respectability' worn on her mother's behalf, then these Yamamoto 'sculptures' were the material of her own longings, the stuff of *her* dreams (Figures 10 and 11).

None of the garments represents what she wears on a daily basis, of course. That is much more mundane and conventional. Day-to-day, she is fashioned by Gap, H&M, the usual department stores, sometimes Whistles (although rarely, these days, by Marks and Spencer – it is not often *her*

Figure 10. Yohji Yamamoto exhibition.

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Figure 11. Yohji Yamamoto exhibition.

M&S). Her special 'pieces' come out when she goes out. She has one pair of shoes the wearing of which requires door-to-door transportation, but she is more typically drawn to the beautiful soft leather and distinctive styling of 'Campers' flats or, if needing elevation, to comfortable wedges by 'Fly'.

She experiences a twin dynamic – of going backwards and forwards at the same time. She finds herself turning back to pick up threads that went astray somewhere along the way, got tangled up with all the other stuff of life. At the same time, she is still moving forwards, still 'becoming' – even if at times *what* she is becoming, in the company of other women of her age, is increasingly invisible … and even if it gets harder to clothe herself in a way that expresses her identity and gives her pleasure.

It is 2016

The auto-ethnographic account above which traces one woman's relationship to clothes and fashion through the inheritance bequeathed to her by her female family members (maternal grandmother, mother, sisters)[8] also highlights the prisms – class, gender and now age – through which other working-class girls have made sense of their lived experience (Hanley 2016; Skeggs 1997; Steedman 1986). And if there is always an element of ambivalence in these stories of social mobility, then it is one that is mirrored among my contemporaries' *personal relationships to clothes in older age* and to the 'fashioning of the self' – although not necessarily along the lines hitherto documented in academic papers. For a feminist who has always inclined

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towards the political economy end of the spectrum, an interest in clothes – and my own clothes – still feels slightly superficial, despite the fact that there is now a well-established academic literature on the body and its modifications (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991; Howson and Inglis 2001; Scott and Morgan 1993; Williams and Bendelow 1998). Justifications are still evident, however. While Steedman's account of her mother's life is used unapologetically to justify 'the politics of envy' in relation to 'things' like clothes, novelist Linda Grant, daughter of immigrants who sometimes arrive in a new country 'with only the clothes on their back', is defiant. She writes:

> I consider it absolutely normal to care deeply about what we wear, and detest the puritan moralists who affect to despise fashion and those who love it. Who shrilly proclaim that only vain foolish Barbie dolls, their brains addled by consumerism, would wear anything but sensible clothes made to last. As if appearances don't matter when, most of the time, they are all we have to go on. Or sometimes, all that is left in the ruins of a life. (Grant 2009:105)

Jane Shilling's memoir also recounts her love of 'the expressive mutability of fashion', of her lifelong experience of being 'intrigued by garments as artefacts, by the mysterious energy of them, and by the technical business of making them' (Shilling 2011:111). But she experienced a disjunction, when arriving at middle age, with which I identify to some extent. She writes of a desire to 'carry on looking like me' when in reality

> the disjunction between the person I felt myself to be inside and the person my clothes announced me to be was intensely disconcerting – a sort of sartorial aphasia, as disturbing as finding oneself suddenly unable to communicate in a language one had once spoken fluently. (Shilling 2011:124)

Shilling (2011:128) is unable any longer to exercise 'the alchemy involved in putting together a look, juxtaposing a disparate clutch of garments to create a coherent autobiographical mini-drama'.

In post-retirement later life I recognise with inescapable clarity that time is finite but that for the time being I have more of it available on a day-to-day basis than I have had since childhood. More time and more freedom, beyond the realm of the higher education 'production treadmill', to explore. And as I spend more time with my women friends, I notice an interesting phenomenon: recurring conversations in which we bemoan, like Shilling, a degree of disjunction in what we want to wear and what is available. I find that I haven't stopped being a researcher after all. I begin to read scholarly accounts of fashion, women and ageing in which my friends and I are seen as a distinctive cohort of elders who are ostensibly renegotiating the experience of age; that 'baby boomers' are the generation that pioneered youth – later consumption – culture, and that we are

supposedly carrying these assumptions over into our own ageing, with an unwillingness to abandon youthful identities and with a greater propensity to remain part of the cultural mainstream. Twigg and Majima (2011) refute this discourse (which they attribute largely to media preoccupations) in favour of a view that we are *not* acting as a cohort as much as following general trends in the population and responding to the wider retailing climate of the period.

Certain high street retailers are apparently shaping and creating a market for older women in which 'adjusting the cut' enables older women's bodies, with all their 'idiosyncrasies', to wear clothes that reflect the prevailing fashion norm. Twigg (2012*a*) suggests that the spread of fashion opportunities to older women entails the colonisation of their bodies by new expectations, new requirements – ones that demand that they be fashionable or well dressed, but present the body in such a way that age is as far as possible effaced. The women in Twigg's study recognise 'the pervasive cultural aspiration of looking younger' (Twigg 2012*a*:124). And 'moving younger' is apparently a central part of what design directors, particularly for ranges aimed at women in later middle age, are engaged in. In order to do so, however, they find themselves treading a careful path between proposing new, more youthful ways of being and offering styles that expose the customer to 'cultural failure'.

Clarke and Miller's (2002) analysis, meanwhile, identifies anxiety as the key to women's relationship with clothes and fashion. The predominantly young women these authors track in a shopping mall as they search for the 'right look' for various occasions all seem to have a pronounced fear of social embarrassment. In the vacuum created by the demise of older forms of authority, officially sanctioned sartorial codes and an unwarranted respect for the voice of industry elites about what fashion 'is', women use various intermediaries such as friends and relatives, catalogues and style consultants in their 'intensive search for the normative'. I find myself speculating that this might be as much to do with their comparative youthfulness and the nature of the particular occasions and life transitions these women are trying to negotiate as with an intrinsically troubled relationship with fashion. And this is to some extent the authors' point: that the relationship of individuals to fashion is socially mediated, as much as attributable to the psychology of the individual or fashion's own system of production.

So what of my friends and me? I don't think that we want to 'move younger' or to follow slavishly each new fashion norm, even if we keep an eye on trends in order to give a nod in their direction. Neither do we seem to be engaged in an intensive search for the normative. We might occasionally experience mild anxiety when striving to 'get it right' in relation to specific occasions. I myself, for example, 'dressed up' the first time I

presented a paper at an academic conference before realising that academics more typically dressed down – at least at the conferences I attended, where, in contrast to some of Green's (2001) professorial interviewees, suits were definitely *not* used to signal authority. This may be because conferences have different sets of conventions and disciplinary values and because they are a unique kind of academic space – social worlds that are constructed as simultaneously within and outside of the formal institutional life of the academy. This is not to say that how women dress there is any less a conscious 'presentation of the self' – or that I am alone in relaxing only when I have decided what to wear for a presentation. But occasions which demand the divining of correct dress codes are fewer now. And although we watch our diets and try to incorporate some exercise into our lives, I think we have also reached a kind of accommodation with our ageing bodies.

Furthermore, until recently, our relationship to fashion seems to have been a source of stimulation, creativity and pleasure. Only now is it getting harder to find the right things – 'right' not for particular social occasions but for our selves. I sense that what we might want at this point in our lives is to continue to explore and express ourselves in the spirit of the 1960s – but *as* sixties – as lively engaged embodied older women, not as the girls we were then. Whatever it is, I think that it is womanly not girly; 'modern' but neither high street nor stultifyingly 'classic'; creative, not some version of the working woman's office uniform; comfortable not tight and skimpy. Perhaps it is various permutations of these things as the mood takes us. These are 'readings' to be tested. I decide to ask my friends for their views and experiences.

I conducted biographical interviews which were both audio- and video-recorded and transcribed; and used five women's narratives to produce a short film, 'Fashioning the Sixties'. These narratives, like those collected by Weber and Mitchell (2004), explore what dress reveals about fundamental aspects of human experience: identity, embodiment, relationship – and ageing. We are white women between 60 and 65 years of age, 'baby boomers' who came of age in the 1960s, a time of cultural revolution when art colleges gave rise to an exciting fusion of art, popular music, film and fashion. We are also predominantly 'scholarship girls' who were the first in our families to go to university and become 'professional' women.

Our stories illustrate how conscious we were of clothes – our female relatives' and our own – from a very early age; and how from a very early age we became subject to the public gaze, as adjuncts of our mothers, illustrative of their accomplishments and representatives of their own need for respectability (embodying what Breward 1999 refers to as 'the tension between

necessity and aspiration'). In that earlier era of austerity, those accomplishments included dress-making and knitting, skills which they passed on to us. In the exciting and creative 1960s, we broke away, physically and psychologically, from the constraints of dress imposed upon us. Through various kinds of experimentation, we now sought and positively enjoyed being looked at and being noticed. Associations with successive tribes gave us guidance, but we were still creative and deployed the skills we had inherited. Parker ([1984] 1996: 215) documents the way feminists have used embroidery in ways that challenge its historical association with 'wifely or domestic duty', and we appropriated and deployed our mothers' dress-making legacy to assemble, adapt, re-style and fashion our selves as 'alternative'. As Dianne observes in the film, 'it was very much about invention being valued … probably invention more than purchase'.

We are told that the tribe to which we now belong, that of older women, is currently the fashionable one, but there is little evidence of this. Those 'retirees' that grace the covers of magazines are usually high-profile working actors typically photographed in prohibitively expensive designer outfits and borrowed jewellery. This 'look', as well as that represented in Ari Seth Cohen's 'Advanced Style' documentary, is beyond our pockets even if we had occasion to sport it. Nevertheless, as Cynthia comments in the film, we are not ready to disappear. Dianne, on the brink of retirement at the point the film is made, voices some fears about this. She talks eloquently of her outfits never having been accidental but always consciously 'put together' – of dressing as 'performance', specifically as the 'playing of parts'. As she withdraws from a public life, she comments that she will have to find 'a new definition' – and only half-jokingly communicates her fears that a planned post-retirement project of doing up an old house might mean she will henceforth only ever be found 'crawling around in a pair of old track suit bottoms'.

Quite apart from the transition from the 'public' to the 'private' that retirement can bring, however, we feel that it is getting harder to fashion ourselves. We too sometimes experience Jane Shilling's 'sartorial aphasia'. Fairhurst's (1998: 266) participants sought to avoid being seen as 'mutton dressed as lamb' by aiming to 'grow old gracefully', which for them translated into 'looking your best' by being 'smart'. We don't buy into the 'growing old gracefully' discourse with its connotations of 'relinquishing' a former self in the interests of 'good taste' *or* the 'growing old *dis*gracefully' discourse with its connotations of a high-visibility performance of resistance and transgression. Nevertheless, it is true, as Janet says in the film, that it is easier for French women, with their own 'understated' style, to 'keep it going through maturity' than it is for us to translate the creativity and 'quirkiness' of British fashion into a style for our older age. Three of us dye our hair

but we've been doing that for years rather than of late to cover the grey that is now appearing. Hurd Clarke, Griffin and Maliha (2009: 711) comment that particular clothing choices and strategies provide older women with a means of 'passing' as younger bodies (Goffman 1963: 73), by concealing or diminishing their discreditable attributes (those physical markers that would immediately identify them as 'old'), so that clothing becomes a form of 'masquerade'. In general, they suggest, there is a retreat from any style or colour that may garner attention, as well as an avoidance of sexuality (Twigg 2007). Their interviewees did indeed refer to both the 'cultural risks' associated with clothes that reveal (specifically, the 'ugliness' of 'turkey' necks and 'bat wing' arms) rather than conceal – including the revealing of flesh seen to signal sexual identity; and the constraints on clothing choices and styles driven by other bodily changes such as a thickening midriff or bunions that precluded the wearing of high heels. To a large extent they favoured 'traditional' or 'classical' fashion choices. In relation to each of these (the physical markers of age, the sensitivity to signalling a sexual identity and the favouring of classical fashion), it may be significant that they were older (71–93 years of age) than the women who feature here. Within my interviewees' narratives, there is a long-standing rejection of the 'traditional'; there is no expressed desire overtly to signal a sexual identity – but neither is there any hint of retreat from this; and despite the fact that only a couple of the women would identify as feminists, it may be due to the sexual politics that we all inherited from the era in which we grew up that there is no felt need either to comply with such strictures as hiding one's upper arms. We both resist the effacement of age and retain an active engagement with clothes and fashion – an engagement which is not only to do with representation and its possible attendant anxieties. Janet and Cynthia both use the same phrase to describe the affirmative aspects of their involvement with clothes: 'my spirits soar'. So the picture painted by this little local tribe is not a totally gloomy one. Yarnal, Son and Liechty (2011) show the fun, liberation and positive attention derived from 'dressing up' by the over-fifties members of the 'Red Hat Society'. We share these pleasures and playfulness but on a more everyday basis rather than as a 'leisure activity' with a 'uniform'.

What is also evident in the film is a tangible visual, tactile and aesthetic relationship with clothes. We are intimately taken up with the feel of them, the textures, the weight, the heft, how they touch our bodies, how they are constructed, the detailing, the subtle colours and shapes, the lines, the silhouette. As Woodward (2007) observes:

> Clothing is imbued with meaning not only through how it appears, but also through how it feels, smells and sounds (Barnes and Eicher, 1993: 3) … it is through this

tactility that the wearer recaptures the potentialities of their former self as a particular synaesthetic experience of remembering is triggered (Kuechler, 1999: 54). (2007: 55)

Over and above the 'semiotics' of clothes, the elements of performance, of public display, of being noticed, it is the very *materiality* of clothes that comes through our narratives – redolent of smocked satin dresses and velvet collars, of prickly organza and little rubber buttons that perish. It is an engagement that can lift our spirits. We love this stuff.

But we are not 'every(older)woman'. Church Gibson (2003) observes that

poverty does not figure in the fashion address to and depiction of old age, though to study any work on gerontology within the social sciences and indeed the current coverage of government plans, we find poverty central to debates … loneliness, bereavement, lack of mobility and confinement, illness and dementia … None of these figure in the selective 'New Ageing' of the fashion world and of consumer culture (Katz and Marshall, 2003). (2003: 329)

Recognising the truth of these observations, we cannot deny that we are an 'unrepresentative', healthy and privileged sample who might easily be enrolled in the 'new ageing' project. Indeed, our stories *are* celebratory to some extent. We have enjoyed being 'stylish' from an early age and 'stylish ageing' (minus the commercial freighting the term carries) could be seen for us as a search for continuity. But even we, it seems, with all the cultural and economic resources at our disposal, struggle to recapture and maintain the 'selves' that we have fashioned throughout our lives.

One response to this has been a return to our 'roots'. The use of cheap labour in the production of high street fashion together with the retail cost of fabrics and of paper patterns mean that 'home-made' clothes are no longer the 'economical' choice they once were. Further, the value assigned to the 'home-made' is, like that assigned to the 'second-hand' (*see* Fontaine 2008), highly context-dependent and subject to change. However, as a postscript, it is worth noting that feedback following various screenings of the 'Fashioning the Sixties' film reveals that it has prompted a number of different audience members to take up dress-making once more – not as a money-saving strategy but as a creative practice and as a solution to the lack of availability on the high street of clothes that meet both our aesthetic and our corporeal needs.

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NOTES

1 'Fashioning the Sixties', shown at the 2013 BSA Auto/Biography Study Group Conference 'Picturing the Self and Identity: Images of Auto/biography', Barcelona; shown to the participants and to other groups of women of the same age group in a series of screenings in their own homes; screened at Ashby Fashion Week, Ashby-de-la-Zouch, UK, summer 2015; selected for and screened at the 'Short Hot Flush Film Festival', Brighton, UK, 3 October 2015; screened to students at the Fashion Retail Academy, London, 8 March 2016; and available from the author on request.
2 Victorian 'row-house' consisting of two small ground-floor rooms with two small first-floor rooms and a shared outside lavatory.
3 *See* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paddy_McMahon.
4 Paying part of one's wages to one's parents to cover the cost of 'board and lodging'.
5 A university in the north-east of England.
6 A weekly delivery round in which customers' orders are delivered to their homes.
7 A character from the UK television series *The Avengers*, played by Joanna Lumley.
8 *See* Buckley (1999) for other first-person accounts of dress-making in women's lives, and Goode (2007) for an example/discussion of auto-ethnography as a method.

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