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**Dress and the narration of life:  
Women's reflections on clothing and age**

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**Abstract**

The chapter addresses the role of dress in the narration of life, exploring the intersections between clothing, embodiment, identity and age. It draws on biographical interviews with three older women each of whom has adopted distinctive mode of dress. The narrations centre on tensions in relation to continuity and change, particularly in relation to age; the interplay between relationships and dress; and ways in which styles of dress intersect with the trajectories of an individual's life.

Clothing, identity and the self are intimately linked; and this remains so throughout the life course. Dress, thus, provides a fruitful field in which to explore the narratives of peoples' lives; the ways in which the experiences of the body and self change and develop; and the interplay between these and socio-cultural expectations in regard to age.

**Three trajectories of time and change**

I want to explore these themes in terms of the interplay of three trajectories. The first is the trajectory of ageing. Becoming old is a socio-cultural process in which individuals move from youth, through middle age to old age. This movement finds expression in a variety of social and cultural forms, of which clothing is one. The clearest way we can see this is through age ordering: the process whereby forms of dress are thought to be appropriate – or more often, inappropriate – for people as they age. Age ordering was a

widespread phenomenon in the past; and, though its extent today is contended, it remains a feature of contemporary dress. The narration of life is, in part, an account of this movement through age, shaped by socio-cultural expectations, prompts, requirements, impositions, external readings of the self and reflections on them by the individual. Together these make up the ways in which we are, in Gullette's (1997) words, 'aged by culture.' Developments within the wider field of cultural gerontology have increasingly recognised the ways in which age is socially and culturally constituted (Phillipson, 1998; K.Woodward, 1999; Gilleard and Higgs, 2000; Andersson, 2002; Vincent, 2003).

The second trajectory is that of historical time. One is not just young or old, but young and old in particular historical times. As we shall see in the three case studies, their narrations of life are clearly located in distinctive historical eras. The choices that faced them were shaped by historical contingencies that operated at different times; and the lives they led display the social and cultural currents of the period. In terms of dress, this is clearly reflected in changing styles and fashions. Indeed the dominance of these means that we are easily able to date memories and images. A significant part of our experience of the past is through the material artefacts that shaped its form and that survive into the present as objects, images and memories. Dress is part of this.

The third trajectory represents the ways in which individual lives and identities change, not just as result of ageing or historical change, but as part of the unfolding of an individual's life. The trajectory of the ageing should not be presented as a unitary or fixed one, as some earlier work on the life course, particularly within the framework of psychology, did. Rather it should be understood a socially and culturally variable, the product of a complex interplay of forces, in which self-conscious reflection and deliberate agency can play a part. As we shall see, this is a theme of one of the narratives in particular.

### **Clothing, Identity and Memory**

The link between clothing and identity has been subject to extensive analysis within sociology and anthropology (Entwistle, 2000; Hansen, 2004). It has been various

theorised in terms of structuralist semiotics, performativity, sub-cultural analysis, distributed personhood, Hegelian self-actualisation. Much of this theorising, particularly in its classic early forms, centres on the links between clothing and social identity, particularly in relation to the master identities of class and gender (Simmel, 1904; Bourdieu, 1984; Wilson, 1985; Butler, 1993; Tseelon, 1995; Davis, 1992; Entwistle, 2000). Breward (2000) argues that clothes play an unacknowledged role in the constitution of social difference, rendering it concrete and visible. That insight, however, is rarely extended to the master identity of Age, which tends to be neglected within sociological theorising (Laz, 2003; Twigg 2009). Clothing is also closely linked to personal identity and its expression. Sophie Woodward (2007) and the authors in Guy and Banim's (2001) collection, reflecting on the question of why people wear what they do, address what they term 'the wardrobe moment', the point where the individual faces the choices, opportunities and anxieties presented by dress. For Miller (1998), on whom Woodward draws, the act of dressing presents an almost Hegelian process of self-actualisation in which the aim (rarely fully achieved) is one of fusion between the self and its material expression.

For these reasons dress is a particularly rich resource for biographical narrative; and it is unsurprising that novelists have also found it a potent field in which to explore the interplay of incident and character (Hughes, 2006). As Weber and Mitchell argue 'clothing, as objects of material culture, can act both as entry points for personal (and private) autobiography in relation to questions of identity, as well as entry points for understanding of the social components of identity as read through individual and collective responses to a particular clothing artefact.' (Weber and Mitchell, 2004, p.4) Dress offers 'a method of inquiry into identity processes and embodiment'. In terms of time and memory, we recognise and remember aspects of ourselves through memories of what we wore. Garments or photographs give access to who we were at a particular time. We also recognise change in our lives by means of changes in dress: what I wore then and no longer do. The chronology of styles is thus part of how life stories are told (S. Woodward, 2007). Clothes allow us to read the personal against the social, with all the inherent tensions and contradictions that produces. Talking about our clothes also 'forces

us to speak, directly or indirectly, about our bodies' (Weber and Mitchell, 2004, p.5). In relation to the biographical narrative of age this means addressing the ways in our bodies have changed. As we shall see in the three examples, the interplay between changes in the body and the expression of identity is a central part of the narrative of age.

The chapter explores life stories through dress of three women, as related in biographically focussed qualitative interviews (Phoenix *et al* forthcoming). The respondents were chosen for their distinctive modes of dress and for the interplay of this with their lives and their aging. Their dress was less oppositional than that in Holland's (2004) study, though it was distinctive and self consciously chosen. The names of respondents have been changed, though their permission has been gained to use images of them. The interviews are part of a larger study funded by ESRC (RES-000-22-2079) , exploring clothing, age and embodiment, and drawing on data from interviews with older women, with retailers, manufacturers and media representatives, and magazine analysis (Twigg forthcoming).

### **Angela**

The theme of Angela's narrative is her journey from secretarial college in South Kensington in the 1960s, through an unhappy marriage to a doctor, to independence through education and the influence of feminism, and life on the alternative music scene in Margate. At each stage of her life, the clothes she wore changed radically.

I interviewed Angela when she was living in Margate, a decayed seaside resort with high levels of deprivation. Though there are a long established working- and lower-middle class communities, it is a fractured social landscape that has been used to house asylum seekers and recipients of community care. Angela has had financial ups and downs with problems of debt, and is currently living on pensioner credit. She was, however, brought up in middle class circumstances in Berkhemstead, where her father was a teacher. The options facing girls in the sixties, even those who like Angela had gone to grammar school, were limited: nursing, teaching or secretarial; and she was sent to a private college in South Kensington to train as a secretary.

This was year long process whereby young women learn not just secretarial and office skills but also social manners and comportment. At the end of their training they would expect to be placed in a company at directorial level; and part of the implicit expectation was that this would provide opportunities to meet a suitable husband. Knowing how to dress and present yourself was part of the training. The picture (figure 1) shows her in a fresh cotton dress with bouffant skirt of the period, and elegantly crossed secretarial legs. But she never felt at ease at secretarial college: the other girls were 'smart, well off and self assured', and she was not. When we look at the picture, however, none of this is apparent: she seems elegant and self possessed, though her description of how she felt at a bodily level is quite the reverse

I've always found it difficult to dress. .. I've always felt a bit of a lump [...] I just felt a lump. I didn't feel comfortable in fashionable, elegant clothes. They just weren't me [...] I did lots of sports at school. I was good academically [...] but I was also very physical. I wasn't this sort of feminine, little girly sort, I never have been [...], I'm a bit of a clumper. I stride and I don't sort of totter.

In her early jobs as an executive secretary she had to dress smartly, but again she never felt at ease. She did not have a great deal of money; and there was not the range of inexpensive clothing that there is now: she mostly shopped at C&A. The unease over dress was paralleled by unease at her role. She did to enjoy being a secretary, particularly working in strongly commercial fields which she found disillusioning.

Angela married and had two children. Her husband was a doctor, and they married when he was still training. He came from a conventional family of higher social class than hers, but had a somewhat uncertain career, marked by educational starts and stops and with frequent changes of job. In analyzing the interviews I was struck by the underlying theme of status anxiety. I had originally seen Angela in the first interview as coming from the secure middle class, but later comments and analysis suggested a slightly different picture, less secure, more anxious. Her father though a school teacher, left school early and did not have degree; home life was economically constrained and unhappy; the other girls in South Kensington came from better off backgrounds. A central theme of the interviews was a feeling uncomfortable - uncomfortable in clothes and in social role, and

this sense of unease was shared by her husband. Once established as a doctor, he wanted her to dress differently:

Angela: And he started saying, 'I think you should dress up a bit more.' [laughs] And we lived in a very middle class dormitory, London dormitory town, where everybody shot off, all the husbands shot off at the station in the morning and their little wives went down in their housecoats and drove home to the kiddies and ohh!

Interviewer: What did he mean by dressing up?

Angela: [laughs] What did he mean? He wanted me to wear something that looked a bit more as though we had lots of money. And we didn't, because then I wasn't working.

He even took her out to buy things that he thought would be appropriate for her to wear:

Angela: I remember one point where he'd just got some kind of salary increase that was quite substantial, and he said, 'Look, I think we ought to go and buy you some clothes'. So we went down to the smart shop and he chose – I mean obviously it was a joint thing, but he chose the things that he wanted me to finally buy, out of the things that I thought [were] reasonably acceptable. And do you know, I never wore them. They went in the cupboard. And I just never felt comfortable wearing them.

Interviewer: What kind of clothes were they?

Angela: Well, one was sort of a knitted skirt suit. I mean it was very swirly – I'm trying to remember what the top was. Very, very fine knit. Beige [laughter]. Oh God, beige, navy blue.

Interviewer: Right, so those kind of colours.

Angela: Those kinds of things. There wasn't a lot of choice to be honest. It was a very respectable town and they sold respectable classic clothes.

She felt trapped because she had no money: 'I didn't have any money you see. [...] And this clothes issue was one of the things that came up between us.' He was able to exert

control in through his role as the sole source of income for the family, and with it of authority in ways that reflect Jan Pahl's (1989) finding on money and marriage.

After they separated, she realized how constrained she had been. Her clothes had been a focus of conflict in the marriage, taking on a symbolic value: 'my ex-husband used to call my clothes outlandish, and that was before I got outlandish!'. She moved to Cambridge which she found a much freer place. Living on benefit, she moved into bohemian circles, took Open University courses, went to college, came under the influence of feminism. The way she dressed changed radically. She began to experiment with alternative dress, with bright colours and counter cultural modes that she found in Cambridge market: her favorite stall there was called 'Loud'. This set the style of dress that she now wears.

On the day we first met, she was dressed in loose trousers and jacket in finely woven stripes and patches, of somewhat Tibetan feel, in shades of purple, and a bright pink nylon wig. She makes a point of wearing boldly coloured clothes, and showed me a number of jumpers and outfits in strong colours. The most dramatic part of her look was the wig, which she had put on deliberately to meet me. She had earlier coloured her hair with vegetable dyes, but as her hair became grey this did not work so well, but she liked the effect of pinks and purples. She wore the wig when she met her current partner after they had become friends on the internet: 'when I came down to meet Mike for the first time, I bought this just to say, Watch it! I'm not ordinary.' Mike, who she describes as 'black sheep of his family' is a musician and DJ on the alternative scene. She found it hard to wear in Margate however. Cambridge had been a tolerant laid back environment, but Margate was much more on the edge – a place where if you wore unusual dress you might be shouted at.

She thinks men find her clothes threatening: 'if I wear things like this, men feel threatened, particularly men of my age group.' This perception relates back to her youth, when being clever was something girls had to hide:

I've always been alarming to men 'cos I'm very bright and that terrifies them. So I mean, maybe that's why I needed to dress in a more conventional way when I

was younger. I mean I do remember my mother saying to me, 'Well, men don't like intelligent women

Angela is in her sixties, but her commentary on dress is not greatly concerned with age. She has come to her current style as a result of her life's journey, and it reflects who she now feels she is rather than a response to age as such. She was aware that older women often feel that they have to tone down or move out of the lime light, but she had found a form of dress that does neither, and feels no need to adjust that in the light of getting older. Indeed one of the things that she discovered about herself was that, despite her earlier lack of confidence, she in fact likes to stand out, to be noticed. She does not want to become invisible or disappear into the background:

I suddenly realised one day, it was quite some while ago, I was thinking about what I wear, and I was thinking: mostly I don't want to stand out, but I wear clothes that say, 'Look at me.' And it was a bit of a shaker to realise that. I don't want to disappear into the background, I really do not want to disappear into the background. I like to be noticed.

As a result she consciously avoids any pressure to tone down. When asked if certain colours were associated with older women, she agreed, citing 'less bright colours, browns, greys, the burgundy type colours, navy blue.' When asked why, she said:

Cos they don't shout sexy....I think the social perception is that older women are not sexy or are not desirable in some form or other. But that is dictated by young people. I mean those of us who are our age know damn well we're bloomin' sexy. It doesn't stop us being sexy. In fact I, you know, if we're talking about sex, my sex life is better now than it's probably ever been.

### **Helena**

The central theme of this interview is continuity. Helena developed a distinctive style of dress in her twenties, that is closely related to her sense of self. It is a romantic and poetic look, that links to the realm of imagination; and she continues to dress in this style despite the changes of age.



Helena was brought up in a town near Canterbury where her father was a government scientist, and her mother full time at home. It was not an easy childhood and her relationship with her mother was full of tension and difficulty, including over clothes. She did not initially go to university, but settled down with her future husband who had dropped out of university, and later developed a successful joinery business. She got a job as a clerk at DHSS. This worked well, as it offered her a stable environment:

I needed to be grounded because I was very, very fucked up. And sort of having lots of forms to fill in and getting people their Giro on time was remarkably grounding. [...] It was very good, you know it was steady, it was calm and it stopped me going bonkers

One of the good things about the office was that they let you wear what you wanted, and she began to develop her characteristic style. The look she favoured - and favours - is a romantic, poetic one that draws on a mixture of Edwardian and 1920s style:

I kind of fell in love with the Edwardian period, and I have worn black stockings, thick - and I didn't have good legs anyway - and I've worn thick black stockings since I was 14 or 15. And in those days you couldn't get them. You could only get American Tan, if you remember, ghastly [...] I used to buy great job lots of these in Debenhams and dye them black. And I'm probably the only woman who went through the summer of 1976 in thick black tights.

Her style is based around leggings, hats, scarves, baggy smocks with something of the look of the Edwardian child. She was pioneer of the charity shop, vintage look.

I just kind of made stuff up. [...] I had a thing about granny dresses. I called them granny dresses, and sadly they've all gone, but they were kind of big dresses that had fitted big grannies, but what you could do, what I used to do, was roll them, sort of hitch them up with a belt or something, and then you were left with a kind of 1920s Bloomsbury type dress. And then if you wore a cloche hat, thick black stockings [...] I mean I used to put rags in my hair, [...] So again it kind of always went back to the Edwardian idyll and James Joyce.

This way of dressing was linked to her love of literature: she is currently doing a doctorate on Joyce.

Her look coincided with the early days of Laura Ashley in the sixties and early seventies, when it was small scale and different, before it became corporate and conventional.

in South Kensington they had their original store [...] All they had was a kind of warehouse upstairs with racks and racks of clothes, and then downstairs a big changing room. And you could get beautiful clothes for about seven or eight quid. And in those days I wore long dresses, before they were very fashionable, and you could get long dresses there, beautiful long clothes. And they were very cheap, but everybody equated them with drugs and degeneracy. And I was at the time certainly very anti drugs but, you know. I liked floating down the street, and people thought it was odd. But then it was adopted by the middle classes and the prices went through the roof. And that, of course, is what destroyed them.

She works on items of dress, adapting, altering or dyeing them:

I buy most of my stuff from charity shops, originally for financial reasons, but also because you can get really good interesting stuff. But I tend to dye most of it. I do masses and masses of dyeing

Her clothes are always in beautifully coloured, never bright or garish, but subtle and creative in their colouring, using contrasting necklaces, mixing different textures and colours. Her hair, drawing on the Pre Raphaelite ideal, is hennaed and flows freely, and she often wears plum tones that vibrant with the henna (figure 3). The love of colour is evident also in the interior of her house. The room where the interview took place was painted apple green, with dark toning and contrasting colours of blues and greens for the painted furniture and textiles, presenting a complex, elaborate interior much like her clothes.

Clothes for her are part of a romantic interior life. She describes herself as someone who has always lived in the imagination: 'the way I dress, a lot of it, was really just being creative with myself, as a way of escape I think, and a way of mythologizing myself.' After having children, she did a degree in English literature, followed by postgraduate research. For her, dress is part of living in the imagination, a form of self expression, but also an escape from the mundanity of the world: 'the work I do at the university is

essential exploration of self. [...]. So I think I have a lot more self understanding, and I think I now realise that I was dressing the way I did to try and circumvent reality.'

This links to her literary interests:

A lot of the stuff I'm trying to express in Joyce is about romantic irony, which, in a way, is the same thing, because it's about self parody. And in a way that's what you're doing. And it's about mythologizing the actual [...] it's connecting spirit and the material, and it's a way of detaching yourself from yourself. [...] [Joyce] mythologized himself as Steven Daedelus. But it took me ages – I mean it's taken me many, many years to make this connection and to see what I was doing with my clothes. But still, it's all a part of the same thing. And it's about – but it is expressing yourself creatively, but it's also becoming part of something bigger.

Despite the fact that the general theme of the interview is continuity and her wish to retain a sense of self above and separate from ordinary fashion changes or conventional ideas about what should be worn, she acknowledged that as she has got older she has had to adjust in some measure:

I'm not as adventurous as I was, and I no longer look as good in romantic stuff because I'm too old. But it's kind of evolved into a – you know, I think you can wear what you like as you get older, if you don't mind looking slightly ridiculous. And that works, that works, because when you're young, you don't want to look too ridiculous because – well you're a young girl and young girls should be beautiful if they can be or whatever. But you can – well I guess I always did look a bit ridiculous but I didn't care. But as I've got older you grow into that.'

When I said some women feared looking ridiculous, she replied: 'Oh no, you have to embrace it.'

She feels that as she has become older she has acquired new qualities that replace those of prettiness: 'you have to say, ok I'm not young anymore and I'm not pretty as I used to be, but on the other hand I've got other strengths now'. This relates to a sense that she has an interior life, a clear authentic self that has come as result of the life she has lived and

the interior life she has developed. Some of the styles she used to love look less good on her now, for example the Alice in Wonderland look: 'It's lovely but I don't think my face is quite right for it anymore'.

Faces change, and:

you get a kind of gravitas that you didn't have when you were younger, you know your face is more – I hesitate to say grim, but it's not as childish

Clothes for her are an expression of inner truth and authenticity; and she does not care what others think if they true to her:

provided I'm happy, to be truthful provided I'm happy with it, I don't give a monkey's what anybody else thinks. But it would be different if I wasn't, then I would feel uncomfortable.

In pursuit of this she is willing to risk looking ridiculous, even 'bonkers':

I've said this about this Alice in Wonderland dress, but it depends you see. If you're trying to have long tousled locks because you want to be sexy then I could see if that is your aim then that might not be appropriate, it mightn't suit your face. But if you want long tousled hair because you want to look bonkers then it doesn't matter.

Her mother was beautiful, and very bound up in her appearance. As she grew older the loss of her looks was a source of vocally expressed anguish. She was very fashionable in the convention mode of the period:

a veritable fashion plate, spent a great deal of money on clothes and her appearance. And when she went into middle age, felt the loss of her looks very, very deeply. In fact it destroyed her.

Helena's style of dress was source of conflict. 'She very much disapproved of my dress'.

Clothes became:

fearful bone of contention. I mean I was very good on the whole, but the clothes were something I could not be good over. And she found the whole Sixties thing anathema. But then, how much of that, in retrospect [...] I mean I was very naïve, how much of that was jealousy? I'm not sure.

She sees now how many older women lose confidence:

I guess losing self confidence is something that does happen a lot of middle aged women. But it depends how much your identity is tied up with how you look. And as I say, I had a very cruel example in front of me, with my mother, of somebody whose identity had been wholly tied up with her appearance, and then when that started to go had nothing. And that is very sad. And there must be a lot of women like that.

Her mother's ageing, thus, became an image of how not to age, and of the vulnerabilities and tragedies that could come from this. She relates her mother's fate to the current situation of older women, wandering dissatisfied around the local department store. They are stuck because they follow the dictates of fashion, which no longer suits them, rather than expressing their own style:

my mother adored Fenwicks. But if you go to Fenwicks, [...] you see women of about my age, or older, wandering around with a very dissatisfied look on their faces, sort of holding things up. And they've obviously got pots of money. But you can see that they feel that they've got to wear what they're being told they have to wear.

Like her mother, they are vulnerable because they have no real inner sense of self:

that was what destroyed her basically, she had no other resources.

### **Joanne**

The central theme of this narrative is resistance and the determination not to abandon the erotic in dress. Joanne is 59 and dresses as a Goth, wearing floor length outfits in black, or Goth-related colours like purple, hooped, laced and elaborately decorated skirts, and tight corsets. It is a dramatic, sexy, romantic look, though its femininity is cut by heavy Doc Martin style boots raised on thick rubber platforms and armoured with silver plates and straps. Joanne was brought up in Lancashire, in a skilled working class family. She married young, having left school to work as a window dresser in a shop in Southport. Her first husband was an accountant: very conventional and controlling. 'Basically he had the cheque book'; and she wore what he thought suitable for an accountant's wife,

which meant ‘whatever was in Debenhams’. After twelve years of marriage, they swapped partners with their best friends; and she has been happily married to her second husband for over twenty years. Though also an accountant, he is very different; and under his influence she experienced new freedom and confidence. He encouraged her to wear younger, sexier clothes: the ra-ra skirts of the 1980s. He shares her interest in Goth dress. They developed a taste together for dressing differently. Initially this related to the clubs and gigs.

We used to go to clubs in London virtually every Saturday night. Slimelight is the greatest Goth club in the world [...] We used to travel up at night. It opens at about 10 o’clock, and it finishes at 8 o’clock in the morning. We used to go up there quite a lot in the summer periods, about five or six years ago. We also went to fetish clubs. We got fetish burn-out basically. So we’ve matured, I suppose, in a way. She still has a wardrobe of rubber wear that dates from that period; but she noted wryly that it was not the sort of thing you could sell in the local boot fair.

She now wears Goth dress all the time, including, in modified form, at work. There was a period, however, when she and her husband felt they had to compromise and wear conventional dress. This was when they sent their sons to boarding school. It was not a happy period for her:

Our two boys went to boarding school, so we had to dress as boarding school parents. Chintzy prints, Viyella, Jaeger, Country Casuals, and we didn’t really like it [...] For six or seven years we were people that we didn’t want to be. [...] I was somebody I did not want to be, and I hated it. And it was not relaxing. It was, ‘Oh God, there’s another function at school. What have I got to wear now!’

Once the boys had left, she could return to dressing in the ways she likes.

More recently, however, the demands of conventional family life pressed in again when her son was getting married. She sensed her future daughter-in-law was anxious that she ‘would show her up’ at the wedding by arriving in Goth dress, which in many ways represents a black reversal of bridal dress. So she decided to ‘go normal’, buying a black and silver knee-length dress at Marks & Spencer which she wore with a pair of high heels

dating from the boarding school days. However, she needed to spend the weekend before practicing with these unaccustomed items. Her daughter-in-law was relieved and grateful. Overall Joanne felt that she had done the right thing: though she did not like the clothes and did not feel comfortable in them, she had made the effort not to embarrass her. She did, however, tease her a little. She has a black lace tablecloth with spiders and coffins on it, and she arrived at the reception with this draped over her head.

Eroticism and femininity were at the heart of her narrative. The look she adopts is a consciously feminine one: corsets, ribbons, lace, albeit with heavy boots and metal flanges. She actively dislikes trousers and never wears them. Goth style she believes is ageless and flatters all shapes through its ability to create an erotic hourglass figure. Corsets are an important part of the look; and she showed me several that she had had specially made. Her ideal is Dita von Tease, and she showed me a picture of her in a corset saying: 'That's my husband's lusting photograph.' Corsets do, however, require you to breathe differently, more shallowly. Though she said that never laced so tight as to pass out, as some women do, there was a slight fetish aspect in her comments. She certainly liked the sense of sexiness that corsets give; and she described how when you take them off, you get a rush as the blood returns. She said that she did not find them uncomfortable, because they were empowering and made her feel good. Throughout the interview, she interprets comfort in the social sense of feeling at ease with yourself and looking as you want to be.

She is very critical of older women who abandon any pretence of looking attractive or erotic. They give up trying to create a figure for themselves and elect for the 'box option'. She calls them:

the anorak brigade. A lot of older people wear anoraks. Or those like puffy jackets. If you took those off, and put yourself in a decent coat, a fitted coat [...] There's no shape to them. So there are a lot of people out there that look really old, that don't need to be looking old.

She is determined this is not going to happen to her:

Even if my belly gets bigger and my waist gets bigger, I'm still going to have a figure when I go out. I'm not going to be a box or a rectangle.

Throughout the interviews there is a strong theme of resistance, of not giving up and of the importance of making an effort:

It's a case of just making an effort and being positive about yourself, and not relying on anybody else to dictate what you have to wear or how you have to be [...] I think a lot of people fade to grey after the age of 60. They, like, stop trying[...] And I'm not going to let go.

A year elapsed between the two interviews, and there was a different feel to the second one. There have been changes in her life: most notably, her husband has been diagnosed with serious cancer. She still emphasized continuity of identity, saying that even if she were to lose him she would retain her style of dress and life; and the theme of defiance and resistance was still there: no twin sets for her. But there were slight signs of moving on in dress. Her husband had proposed a new style for her: leggings and a long top, still in black but more related to current fashion, and crucially I felt, less focused on the overt sexuality of the Goth look. She was considering this. As yet however she has no wish to give up the long, flattering skirts or voluptuous corsets and shaped bodices.

## **Conclusion**

We have followed the personal narrative of three women who have consciously adopted distinctive dress. I want now to return to the interplay between these narratives and the trajectories of time, change and age. As we noted at the start, each life is distinctive: there is no single or predictable way in which it unfolds, or in which individuals age. And that is true of the examples presented here, each displaying patterns of looping back, of change, of new directions, with late entry into university life, new partners, different jobs - or non jobs - new perceptions of the world, how it works and what matters. This is most striking in the case of Angela, who could hardly have predicted her current life as a pensioner on the alternative music scene of Margate from the starting point of that South Kensington secretarial college. But it applies to Helena also, with her doctoral work on Joyce, who started out from difficult relations with her mother and the shelter of work in



a DHSS office. The unexpected and consciously chosen is also present in Joanne's life. These jumps, starts and changes – and also continuities – are reflected in the clothes they wore, and wear. Their dress make manifest the individuality of their lives.

At the same time their narratives intersect with the second trajectory, that of historical change. As we noted at the start, we are young and old in particular historical times. Helena's and Angela's narratives of dress are imbued with a feeling of the past: Angela's account of the manners and modes of the secretarial college in South Kensington in the 1960s; Helena's memories of Laura Ashley's changing rooms, the decadence as well as the freshness of the long trailing skirts. In Helena's case her look, though distinctive and personal to her, reflects a particular historical period – that of the neo-Romantic, Pre-Raphaelite revival of the 1970s. Angela's current style also draws on early alternative, feminist or hippy fashions, with their brightly coloured ethnic influences and their conscious rejection of the elegant, structured or discrete. Goth dress also is rooted in a particular period: that of the eighties when it first made an appearance as a street style. Each thus takes into the experience of age, features of dress distinctive to the historical period in which their lives have unfolded.

Lastly the narratives also intersect with the experience of ageing itself and the cultural meanings that attach to this process. Each of the respondents reacted differently. In Angela's narrative of dress there was little directly addressing the issue. She had chosen an alternative style that lay outside the outside age coding of conventional dress, and thus no special adjustment to age. For her it was a simply a style she liked and felt expressed who she was. In her earlier adoption of this, there had been an element of conscious defiance; it was act of independence with a clear element of 'look at me'. She was not going to allow ageing to face her down in this. The style was also slightly asexual with its loose comfortable trousers, baggy overshirts, though she attests strongly to the sexuality of age. It was certainly anti glamorous in conventional terms, and as a result raised questions of age less strongly than it would have been the case with styles that emphasise the eroticism of youth. Joanne had taken a very different route. Her style was consciously erotic and glamorous. She railed against the asexuality of older women, the

way that they abandoned any attempt to look attractive or to maintain a normative female figure. For her, identity was closely bound up with remaining glamorous and desirable, of resisting the erosion of age, as she had resisted the neutrality of the 'vanillas'. Helena presented a different approach to the issues of ageing and dress. She recognised that some of the looks she had enjoyed were now less successful; and this was particularly so with romantic, kooky styles, but her response was to push past this difficulty, to embrace it, even at the risk of looking yet more eccentric. And so she forged a new look that drew on qualities of romance and poetry more enduring, and more interior, than just youthful prettiness.

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## Captions for pictures

1. Angela, front row third from the left, at the secretarial college in South Kensington.
2. Angela in 1960s
3. Angela today in Margate in the pink wig
4. Angela in London
5. Helena today
6. Joanne in boarding school mode
7. Joanne at Goth event
8. Joanne in corset

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