

## FOUR DRESSES AND A WAISTCOAT

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### INTRODUCTION

Disruption of fashion has long occurred in the margins of society, facilitated by informal economies of DIY, second-hand and home-made. In this article, I argue that the style preferences of those who prefer to inhabit the margins could be described as signifiers of what Foucault terms "heterotopias." Foucault's notion of heterotopia uses 'hetero,' meaning different, coupled with 'topia,' the dominant space, thereby describing something that is an alternative space (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986).

I use the lens of reflexive autoethnography as a mirror to revisit a time in the late 1970s-1980s where I sought to resist the homogeneity of small-town and suburban New Zealand. This process of resistance was in part expressed by what I wore, a bricolage referencing the post-punk aesthetic. While I did not belong to a subculture as such, through my research I have found that I shared some of the same influences as the New Romantics and others in terms of music, film, books, magazines. As these movements were essentially working class, they shared my lack of discretionary cash (no credit cards) and, most importantly, made the most of the availability of beautiful second-hand clothing.

Cervellon et al. found that wearing second-hand clothing is a common motivator for women who wish to demonstrate a resistance to or disruption of fashion trends (2012). With this in mind, this article focuses on five items of second-hand clothing that I owned during this period. It has also been well documented that what you wear is more about social relations than aesthetics (Franklin, 2014; Polhemus, 1994). In my discussion, I consider whether my inspiration and choice of dressing correspond with Foucault's six elements of heterotopia (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986) in order to argue that personal clothing choice can be used as a signifier of heterotopia.

### METHODOLOGY

In this paper, I construct a praxis of my own lived experience within the context of the early post-punk era. I do this by using a self-reflexive autoethnographic approach to apply multiple lenses to five garments I wore in the period between 1977 and 1984.

Autoethnography is a qualitative method used to extend sociological understanding through the examination of personal stories with the aim of informing discourse about social relations and identity politics (Wall, 2008; Boylorn, 2016). Through autoethnography, the researcher creates transitional spaces by applying multiple layers or lenses (Ettore, 2017, p. 3; Boylorn, 2016). Franklin's self-reflexive autoethnography provides a useful vehicle by which to study personal clothing choice (Franklin, 2014), and is highly applicable to this study. In combining personal phenomenology with autoethnographic method, self-reflexive autoethnography seeks to capture a moment in time, the sweet spot where memory interacts with history, written from the perspective of hindsight.

To capture this moment, I have held a mirror up to myself as a young woman in my late teens and early twenties, as recollected from the vantage point of myself as a mature woman in her early sixties. By teasing out the small intertextual moments that have manifested around specific garments (Franklin, 2014), I confine my discursive field to five items of clothing, and thus I am only offering a partial perspective on those times. My approach is justified by the notion that objective vision can only be achieved through a partial perspective (Franklin, 2014). Overlaying this is my relection on the lens of contemporary texts that reflect on the fast-moving social and cultural environments of the times that had an influence on me, thereby situating my experience in a wider context. In addition, I describe the second-hand clothing itself as an artefact that has its own social context – something that was once an example of fashion, now deemed unfashionable. I consider how the artefact is subverted by being taken out of its original context and investigated in a new era.

## DON'T DREAM IT, BE IT

In order to set the cultural scene, I will describe the main cultural influences that had an impact on my social circle and led me to the world of second-hand clothes, starting in the 1970s. I gained an appreciation of 1930s and 1940s dressing from the Sunday afternoon movie that was a regular feature of 1970s television. These movies featured many Hollywood classics, so that we were highly aware of the glamour and style of earlier eras. In the context of global fashion, the 1970s were already a time of nostalgia for the recent past – the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (Howell, 1975). Second-hand emporia of the late 1970s, such as Dunedin's Frangipani, Savoy and Erehwon, offered a halcyon time for the judicious shopper, as they were awash with beautiful, often hand-made garments from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, allowing you to experiment with your own version of the old-time movie glamour.

This experience was also influenced to a limited extent by glam rock artists coming out of Britain. There was little homegrown glam rock in New Zealand in the 1970s, despite its popularity overseas; the 1974 appearance of Space Waltz on Studio One's *New Faces* TV music show has been cited as the country's finest glam rock moment. "Tragically, the national preference was for gumboots, not platform boots; for black singlets, not sequinned capes" (Chapman, 2108).

It is within this context that we find New Zealand's most significant contribution to the cultural style of the late 1970s, made by expat Richard O'Brien, who had to cross the world to get his *Rocky Horror Picture Show* made, which he then gave back to New Zealand to drag us out of our suburban sensibilities. I have a distinct memory of seeing *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* ("The Rocky Horror Show," 2021) movie in 1978 on a Sunday night in the Civic picture theatre in Green Island, Dunedin, as a double feature with Led Zeppelin's *The Song Remains the Same* – in this pairing, *Rocky Horror* made Zeppelin's film look archaic. While Robert Plant and company were posturing their hypermasculinity in *Lord of the Rings*-inspired vignettes, *Rocky Horror* presented a brightly spangled, gothic sci-fi, androgenous and transgender world (Reynolds, 2017) that conveyed that it was cool to be different. The audience at the Green Island Civic were presented with a "late night, double feature, picture show" (O'Brien, 2021), a cultural mash-up of "celluloid jam," of classic movie tropes that we all knew and loved. O'Brien spoke directly to alienated youth with these cultural references; the cult of *Rocky Horror* spread via word of mouth all over the world, granting the movie the unlikely status of a sing-along classic (Reynolds, 2017). I went to the movies that night to see Zeppelin, but it was *Rocky Horror* that stole the show and became a pivotal moment in my style education. In the words of Dr Frank-N-Furter, "Don't dream it, be it" (The Rocky Horror Wiki, n.d.).

I spent my early years in multicultural metropolitan London, with the swinging 60s as a backdrop; this experience meant that despite arriving in New Zealand as a six-year-old, I still looked to Britain for cultural meaning. As a teenager in New Zealand, I read English fashion magazines and, as the 1970s came to a close, I became more and more attracted, primarily through music, to a style that was seen as alternative to the mainstream fashion available in New Zealand. It helped that mainstream fashion was very limited and that New Zealand designer fashion was almost invisible before the 1990s (Molloy, 2004). In 1979 my mother bought me Georgina Howell's book *In Vogue*:

*Six Decades in Fashion* for Christmas – it has been my style bible ever since. Although Howell's six decades ended in 1974, she predicted that the 1970s would be seen as a time when your clothes no longer reflected your social or occupational place in society, but allowed anyone to dress up as a form of individual expression (Howell, 1975). The 1970s were also known as the “me generation” (Herald, 1992) – so it wasn't the label you wore, but how you put it all together that defined one's personal style (Howell, 1975).

## FROM PIRATE SHIRTS TO HARD TIMES

Being your own stylist came to the forefront in the late 1970s as a result of the short-lived punk movement, which brought with it an egalitarian, do-it-yourself (DIY) attitude that was central to what would come next. The DIY aspect was important as an expression of resistance, designed to set wearers apart from the mainstream (Skylar, 2013). In its beginnings, punk style didn't incorporate the more flamboyant attributes it is most remembered for, such as safety pins and mohawks; it was a subtle styling that would be overlooked if seen in the street today (Swale & Wilson, 2016). However, glam rock, coupled with the punk DIY approach, spawned a style movement that highlighted individual expression and creativity that utilised a form of bricolage, manifesting in a small but influential British-based underground club culture (Jones, 2021). All proud peacocks need somewhere to show off, and its genesis can be traced to a “Bowie night” launched in 1978 in a club called Billys in London's Soho (Johnson, 1983). By 1981, and several clubs later, the movement had all but dissipated – after which it was commodified, caricatured and captured by the fashion industry to live on for much longer as the New Romantics.

So in researching this period, it was a revelation for me to find out that the young people who frequented the clubs of Soho were also influenced by many of the same cultural elements as my friends and I were in New Zealand, such as the old movies we saw on television. Dylan Jones argues that in the late 1970s there was a cachet to dressing in second-hand clothes: “with its plethora of styles, it had no particular meaning, and yet it coalesced into something significantly identifiable” (Jones, 2021, p. 184). This is a sentiment that I adopted more and more as time went on – to strive to be identifiably different from the mainstream by the way I dressed.

What came next was a somewhat harder look. As Robert Elms wrote in September 1982 for *The Face* magazine, “Every kid is a dressed-up kid, every home has a hipster: This is *A Tale Of Hard Times*” (Elms, 2019). The essence of Hard Times was the shift from the glamorous interval that came out of the art schools and suburban terraces of the UK to a more class-situated story that often referenced working men's clothing. The style tropes of Hard Times were influenced by the docker, the rocker, the mod, the coal miner and the jazz musician – all rebels without a cause (Polhemus, 1994). Very masculine, yet with an androgenous edge, even the most sultry of 1980s artists, Sade Adu, wore faded Levi 501s with cowboy boots and men's tuxedos to great affect, while street stylist Judy Blame paired his costume jewellery with a Crombie hat and sportswear to create Buffalo style (McCord, 2020).

I was an avid reader of *The Face* throughout the 1980s. While my social circle did not have an underground club culture to influence our dressing, we were influenced by some of the same tropes through movies and magazines and we loved these evolving looks. I recall that the ‘dress up’ party was big back in the 1970s and 1980s. This was not fancy dress as such. It wasn't about imitation, more appropriation – and people made their own looks, usually utilising second-hand and homemade clothes. It was very creative. I recall one party in 1978, at my friend's large Victorian mansion flat in Dunedin, where even the gate-crashers went home and dressed up before returning to join the dancing.

## THE CLOTHES

What follows are descriptions of the most important second-hand garments that I wore between 1977 and 1984. I have presented these clothes in chronological order of when I owned and wore them first. The clothes themselves originate from the 1930s to the 1950s.

### 1940s green crepe dress (worn in 1977)

This dress came to me from my grandmother. Of her granddaughters, I was the only one who had an interest in sewing; the catch was that this dress came incomplete, cut out in pieces ready to sew, but with no instructions. I believe it was started in the 1940s and had been the work of my great aunt. The fabric was a soft, sage-coloured crepe, with a weight that gave it a pleasing drape on the body and, although economic in its silhouette, it also had a satisfying swish and swing when worn. It was an A-line skirt, shirt-waister style with buttoned-up bodice. The bodice also had pleats to give a blouse effect. This piece is a classic 1940s silhouette A-line knee-length skirt, with nipped-in waist and squared shoulders. At the time there was a preference for a utilitarian, almost military feel that fitted with a society moving from the Depression into the Second World War (Vintage Dancer, 2017).

The process of sewing the dress was an intriguing jigsaw puzzle, but miraculously it was a perfect fit. The only thing I didn't know how to put on was the peplum – I had no idea what these extra pieces of fabric were for: I didn't know what a peplum was, so I didn't include them. (A peplum is a skirt-like frill worn in this case around the waist.) Nineteen-forties fashion was all about economy and practicality. The long sleeves and peplum are perhaps a sign that this dress was designed as something special. The extra fabric used made it a little more extravagant, as short sleeves and lack of adornment were important elements of the decade.

I wore the dress with a wide, soft-pleated black leather belt instead of the peplum, as it seemed to need something at the waist. It was a dream to wear and felt very elegant and sophisticated for a teenager; very different from what was in fashion at the time and very different to the dresses I had made myself up till then – predominantly very short minis or very long maxis, with a princess-line bodice (probably using the same dress pattern in different fabrics) mostly made from stiff cotton in loud prints. Wearing this dress made me feel very different and I found I quite liked that. This was my first second-hand dress and its influence changed the way I dressed as I moved into my twenties.

Street style in the final years of the 1970s and the early 1980s has been described as extravagant, creative, increasingly concerned with transmitting ideas through style and appearance (Simon Tesler, as cited in Jones, 2021,



Figure 1. Green crepe dress, 1977.  
Photograph: Author's collection.

p. 283). This attitude must have filtered through to New Zealand and ultimately led us all to the dressing-up boxes of Erewhon, Frangipani and the other second-hand clothes emporia that sprung up around Moray Place in Dunedin in the late 1970s. The garments sold here were termed second-hand; the terms vintage and opportunity (op) shop had not yet entered the local vernacular. They were also private businesses; I was aware of only one charity-based shop, not in central Dunedin but further south, slightly outside the shopping precincts.

Looking back on these shops from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it is interesting to note that the notion of second-hand has changed to mean clothing from the recent past that is worn primarily to be thrifty. Clothes from the 1920s-1980s (the inclusion of the 1980s depends on your vantage point) are defined as vintage, and it is agreed that the motivation for wearing vintage is mostly for the purpose of appearing unique (Cervellon et al., 2012). In a contemporary sense, Frangipani and Erewhon would be considered vintage clothes shops. However, I chose these clothes firstly to be unique, but also to be thrifty at the same time.

### 1940s green house dress (worn in 1978)

I am not sure where I bought this second dress. I think it was likely from Erewhon, a large, cavernous shop in a basement in Moray Place full of vintage delights; it was as much a destination as a shop, a place to linger in and hone your eye for quality. While my modest house dress was not as elegant or easy to wear as my crepe dress, it is the epitome of the utilitarian 1940s – no extra fabric, a practical viscose print fabric, adorned only by military-inspired piping detail (Vintage Dancer, 2017). At this point, I was already experimenting by adding an androgenous edge, styling this dress with lace-up boots, a tweed hacking jacket and a white-fringed silky scarf similar to what might be worn with tails – thereby mixing elements of British menswear from both a working-class and upper-class perspective. The photograph was taken during my first year at university; wearing this dress, I felt it definitely gave me cachet, being one of a kind, an original.



Figure 2. Green house dress, 1979.  
Photograph: Author's collection.

I went to university in Christchurch and it didn't take me long to discover Shand's Emporium in Hereford Street, where I found my next dress. Shand's was a two-storey historic building with smaller shops inside, mostly selling second-hand clothes and other used items.

### 1930s black evening dress (worn in 1979)

This beautiful evening dress in rayon-knit, constructed in bias-cut panels with a beaded bodice, is etched in my mind's eye as the most beautiful dress I have ever owned. It cost more money than I could really afford at the time but, like my first second-hand dress, it was a perfect fit and seemed made for me. In the late post-punk era, the attraction of dressing in a vintage style has been described as strongly linked to a cult of alienation: "[it] was all to do with looking like a glamorous protagonist in your own film noir" (Michael Bracewell, as cited in Jones, 2021, p. 320). My dress mirrored the classic 1930s evening gown, a fitted silhouette of sleek elegant lines, form-fitting drape and subtly beaded bodice and subtle sweep at the hem (Vintage Dancer; n.d.). Film noir is exactly what this dress meant to me; wearing it, I definitely felt glamorous.

I felt this most strongly when I wore the dress to the leavers' ball at a posh Wellington girls' school. I was attending with my then boyfriend, whose sister was "leaving." This rarefied world of boarding schools and leavers' balls was a mystery to me, and although I was the only young woman in the room in black, surrounded by pastel taffeta, this dress gave me the armour to negotiate an environment I felt totally out of place in. This experience reinforced my comfort in being on the margins, present but almost not present; but, most importantly, I learned the immense power of elegance. Sadly, I have no photographs of this dress and I only wore it on a couple of occasions before ruining it by washing it, resulting in the cellulose beading melting. Perhaps its brief appearance in my life has lifted it to mythical status in my memory – a memory in grainy black and white, most definitely film noir.

### 1940s/50s green mens' moleskin waistcoat (worn 1982)

My vintage finds were not confined to dresses. I also wore menswear; most notably a sage-green, cotton moleskin man's waistcoat. I wore this item with tweed trousers for an androgenous English country look. I also had an oversized men's dress shirt which I wore with cufflinks as a night shirt, a combination which fitted a 1920s-30's menswear aesthetic.

It was perfectly acceptable to play around with androgynous dressing in the early 1980s – in fact, it was almost compulsory. As well as reflecting the working man look of *Hard Times*, this style was ironically mixed with the upper-class sensibility of Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited*. Without a doubt, the 1982 broadcast of the 11-hour-long TV series, *Brideshead Revisited* (Waugh et al., 1981), was a major style influence. While my flatmates and I didn't watch much television, we all sat down to watch this epic series when it aired. It was, however, the clothes of the characters, Charles Ryder and Sebastian Flyte, that caught my attention, along with the riding clothes of Charles's sister, Cordelia. In 2020 Lucy Saldavia wrote that this show retains "an enduring power, with the mood and aesthetic of the series still exerting influence in fashion, film, and television today" (Saldavia, 2020). *Brideshead* brought to mainstream television the notion of an ambiguous and fluid sexuality, as in the opening scenes, which presented two beautiful young men, engaged in a deep 'friendship' over an idyllic English summer (Waugh, 1945).

This romantic picture of louche elegance appealed equally to both men and women. While not from the 1920s-1930s period themselves, the items I owned, especially the shirt and waistcoat, were a good example of how inspiration translates to the practice of bricolage, as these pieces spoke to me of the romance of menswear, rather than replicating a particular era.

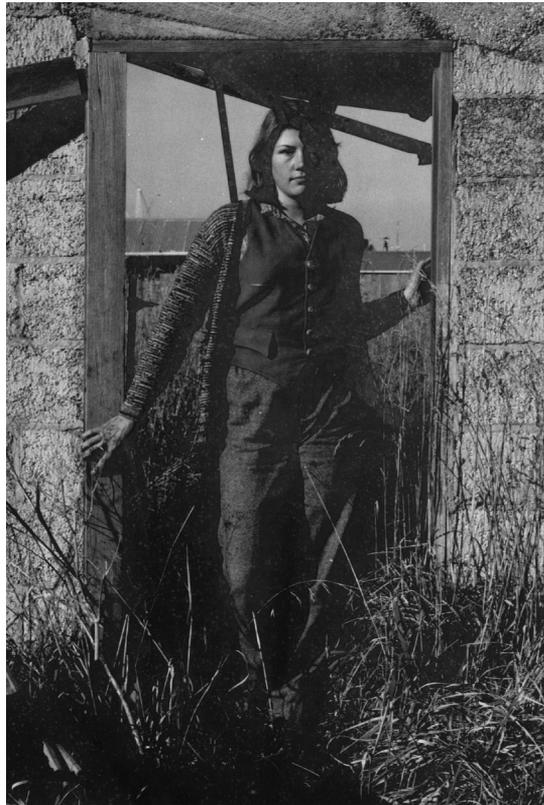


Figure 3. Moleskin waistcoat.  
Photograph: John Hawkhead, 1982.  
Author's collection.

### 1940s black dress (worn in 1984)

This was my gig-going dress. Fittingly, this dress is in the style of the 1940s swing dress, made to dance in, a little fuller in the skirt than earlier utilitarian styles and with slightly puffed sleeves to allow movement (Vintage Dancer, 2017). I could wash this dress, which was important given the many smokey venues I frequented. I wore it accessorised with a studded wristband and dark, gothic-style makeup.

While I feel that music had a strong influence on my dressing, particularly in the early 1980s, on examination it seemed to owe more to an idea rather than copying a set style. I was into post-punk, described as “a rejection of traditional rock aesthetics and a move towards experiment, playing around with other styles of music such as dub, disco, jazz, noise and world music” (Bendall, 2017). While that description suggests some flamboyance, when I look back at the bands I followed at that time, I don't recall much that influenced me in the way the bands themselves dressed, so I can only surmise that the influence came by way of an attitude. The New Zealand bands I saw in the 1980s didn't have many women members; the exceptions were the all-woman group Look Blue Go Purple, who always made a sartorial statement in 50s and 60s dresses; and Jane Dodd and Caroline Esther, both from different periods of The Chills. Other bands always looked fairly minimalist, pre-dating the trend that was to come in the 1990s. The most flamboyant and the nearest to the New Romantic ideal of dressing up were male pop bands, notably The Mockers and the very early Dance Exponents. Dress-up for men in New Zealand music was, I imagine, a risky thing. While Alistair Riddell from Space Waltz and Split Enz could pull it off, otherwise it was only for the very brave who could survive the culture of masculinity that was de rigueur in New Zealand during those times.



Figure 4. Black crepe dress, 1984.  
Photograph: Author's collection.

I finish my exploration at the end of 1984. I lost confidence in putting something together myself and the yuppie culture was omnipresent – I couldn't make sense of it. New Zealand had seen plenty of social unrest in the 1970s and 1980s (Swale & Wilson, 2016), and governments were becoming more right wing and neoliberal, culminating in the 1991 benefit cuts (King, 2003). Being poor was vilified and a more prosperous, designed living style was democratised. Although I attempted to embrace 'designer' clothes through making my own from Vogue Patterns Designer series, these were mostly unsuccessful. There was definitely a shift in attitudes in the mid-1980s. To paraphrase singer Marc Almond, the 1980s were a decade of two halves. The early part of the decade was a time of experimentation, creativity and androgyny, after which came “a very masculine culture, a very heterosexual culture ... The eighties ended in 1985” (Marc Almond, as cited in Jones, 2021, p. 586).

## DISCUSSION

Foucault describes the space held by a heterotopia as a mirror that reflects a set of relations that are created by their contradiction to, or inversion of, other sites (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). The idea of the mirror fits well with autoethnography, as it also holds a mirror up to a lived experience. The mirror of a heterotopia reflects the self, therefore making it an appropriate tool to apply to my research on how clothes defined my own act of disruption.

Foucault sets out six criteria for the classification of heterotopias. Firstly, one should consider the type of heterotopia at issue, prompted by either crisis or deviation. In my experience, the clothing choices I made fit into the category of deviation heterotopia, involving seeking out an alternative to the norm.

The second criterion refers to the heterotopia's agreed function in society; clothes of course have the dual functions of protection and displaying cultural or personal identity.

The third criterion requires that the heterotopia creates a juxtaposition, a set of unrelated spaces in a single real place. In putting together a bricolage of clothing items from multiple eras, I am juxtaposing different fashion periods at the same time. For example, I added a leather belt from the 1970s to replace a peplum on a 1940s dress; accessorised a 1940s swing dress with ripped tights and studded wrist band; and wore garments in unexpected ways, such as the man's dress shirt with cufflinks that I wore as a nightshirt. Even my inspirations mixed the contemporary with the historical – 1930s and 1940s Hollywood glamour is juxtaposed with the 1970s *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the post-punk music of the 1970s and 80s.

Foucault's fourth criterion is that heterotopias exist in a defined slice of time, or are temporal in character. For my story, this is the period 1977-1984, a time when I was exploring my own identity and a specific set of influences and materials were accessible to me, including the second-hand emporia of Frangipani, Erehwon, the Savoy and Shand's. These emporia provided a physical space where my ideas, sourced from music and other media, could be conceived and developed into something altogether different from what was available to buy in contemporary boutiques. In these emporia, style was about something you cobbled together from the materials available to you; these choices could be shared with others also interested in the same emerging forms of popular culture. Polhemus talks about Style Tribes, which he describes as cultural segments of society that develop during periods where individuality and personal freedom connect. This set of social conditions produces a particular style of dressing marked by utilising what comes to hand (Polhemus, 1994). It could be argued that Polhemus's Style Tribes have a heterotopian character.

Foucault's fifth criterion is that heterotopias cannot be available to all people, at all times; they are both isolated but also penetrable. Just like those clubs in Soho in the late 1970s where provocateur Steve Strange decided who could enter on any one evening (Jones, 2021), there is an exclusivity that can be breached if you are imaginative enough. Likewise, the gatecrashers at my friend's 1978 Dunedin party felt that the party space was impenetrable without first going home and coming back dressed up. There must have been a time when I first entered Dunedin's emporia of second-hand clothes when I didn't feel I belonged. These weren't op shops in today's parlance – they were more than just shops, and were penetrable only to those brave enough to enter.

These emporia also speak to Foucault's sixth and final criterion, that a heterotopia reflects (in this case) a perfect, illusionary, yet real space which is seen in contrast to the messy space of everyday life. Clothes in themselves speak to this idealised space, as you can remake your image to suit your identity.

## CONCLUSION

The style aspirations that I nurtured when I acquired my four dresses and a waistcoat had their genesis in many cultural influences, elements which, when combined, signified a personal resistance to the mainstream fashion of the late 1970s to mid-1980s. The materials, mainly second-hand clothes, were easily and cheaply procured. My influences were sourced within a pre-digital environment where media were slow and long – movies, books, six-month-old magazines from the other side of the world, the music album and weekly episodic television series. When combined with these influences, clothes from different eras formed a bricolage to produce an alternative viewpoint that had very little to do with the original garments or the fashion of the time. Viewed within the context of heterotopias, my experience was a reflection of how I wanted to present myself to the world as a disrupter of the mainstream. As outlined above, my experience meets all six of Foucault's criteria for signifying a heterotopia.

In my analysis, I have used the medium of clothing to describe the heterotopia I was inhabiting during the late 1970s to the mid 1980s. While Foucault refers to heterotopias as not being real places, he also acknowledges that they can also be defined by physical spaces, usually buildings or other built spaces such as gardens. In this article, I take his ideas of real space further; by employing the physical boundary that clothes provide for the body to signify all the elements required by Foucault to create a heterotopia.

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