



# *Hooks*

## INTRODUCTION *Redoing the Laces*

Thinking can be a little like lacing up skates. With skates, you may have a method that works for you. Then suddenly it doesn't. Your skates are too tight or too loose. You have to keep retying them. Maybe a lace pops off a hook while you're skating. This could just mean an off day. Or your skates are starting to break down (which, like dull blades, can be a slow or sudden discovery) and you need a new pair. Or someone shows you a twist, variation, or extra knot that makes you realize that your method was never quite as good as you thought.

I root my approach to this section in two invitations that really stuck with me since I encountered them in the 1990s to shift what might be called the techniques of conceptual lacing. The first invitation occurred in 1991 during the question-and-answer segment of a lecture at Bates College by Eve Sedgwick. I don't remember the exact question but it concerned using identity categories like race, class, gender, and sexuality to understand people's circumstances, beliefs, and interactions. Sedgwick responded by asking the audience who among us had a sibling of the same sex. Then, of this group, how many were really different than that sibling? A bunch of us raised our hands again, laughing in shared acknowledgment of the funny, sometimes painful moments that this family situation can cause. Sedgwick pointed out that significant dissimilarities among siblings constitute clear evidence, right in front of most of us, of how much identity categories, though crucial to consider, fall short of explaining. After all, siblings often share our "race, class, and gender," usually matched even further according to demographic variables in upbringing like geographical location, economic status, religious training, ethnicity, nationality, and education. Yet that doesn't preclude the common sibling-from-another-planet phenomenon.

I found the second invitation in two essays by Juliet Ash in *The Gendered Object*, a 1996 anthology. The first essay, called "The Tie: Presence and Absence," considers cultural meanings connected to wearing, or not

wearing, ties in several types of outfitting, including men's work outfits, women's fashion, and schoolgirl uniforms. Through ties, Ash argues, gender norms that, in effect, come with the tie, may be "re-established or subverted," depending on various factors: how and with what ties are worn; complications of choice, aesthetics, and acquisition (the tie as gift); and attendant power relations. (The college custodian and the fashionable male professor have different reasons for not wearing ties on campus).<sup>1</sup> The second essay, "Memory and Objects," concerns presence, absence, and ties from a different perspective. Catalyzed by the death of Ash's husband, it considers how items of clothing conjure memories, events, intimacies, and interactions through the way they look, feel, smell, and inhabit space with you.<sup>2</sup> While her primary interest concerns clothes that we retain after their wearers have departed, I particularly appreciate the more general impetus to pull personal relations into analyses of how wearable (and other) objects work on us, with us, and through us.

In this section, I present my own conceptual lacing and relacing on the topic of skates themselves. I offer it in the spirit of Sedgwick's call to remember the insufficiencies of nonetheless illuminating categories and of Ash's project of going beyond such categories. My structure echoes *The Gendered Object* in the placement of Ash's essays, which have several essays between them. I like the rhythm of looking at something, traversing other (occupied) territories, and coming back to look again.

Here, historical and personal pieces on the gendering of skate color bookend the section. The first essay, which is called "White Skates Become You," considers the history and politics of the norm that females of all skin tones generally wear white, or occasionally tan, skates. The final essay, named "Black Skates, or the Stakes in Wanting," takes up my own conflicted relationship with that tradition. Between these two bookend essays are "Form-Fitting: The Bra in Three Stories" and "My Grandmother's Shoes." Both consider other gendered wearables and look at cultural habits, individual idiosyncrasies, and the narratives through which people make sense of themselves, their objects, and their gear.