

Dress Casual: How College Students Redefined American Style

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Reviewer: John Potvin

Sportswear is as much a signifier of American cultural identity as are apple pie and the Super Bowl. As Deidre Clemente shows in her expansive study of the history of fashion on American college campuses, the comfortable and casual sportswear adopted by collegians made their way gradually, over the course of the first half of the 20th century, into the mainstream, forever affecting the ways Americans dress. College campuses across North America are not simply indicators of fashion trends and collegiate taste, but material registers of cultural ideals and social mores. As a means toward providing historical evidence for her central argument that '[t]he modern American wardrobe was born on the college campus in the first half of the twentieth century' (p. 1), the author delves into the rich archival legacies of a select set of Ivy League, state and historically black colleges and universities across the United States. Unfortunately absent is a rationale for the selection of the colleges under review.

Clemente focuses her attention on the turn of the century to 1960, the period she argues witnessed the ascendancy of youth culture and its direct and palpable impact on American culture, taste and everyday fashion. The period's changes, she argues, demonstrate a 'seismic shift' in collective notions of taste, wherein collegians across the United States played a formidable, if not the most important, role. Youth culture's impact on the American wardrobe was in turn greatly aided and abetted by eager retailers whose role was no longer that of educators of style, elegance and taste as it had previously been, but of savvy marketers responding to the needs and desires of collegians in what was a shifting cultural and moral landscape. For as Clemente rightly asserts, '[t]he book is about how cultural standards are forged, challenged, and then recast' (p. 4). This book, then, within the American context, is more than just about mere sweaters and plaid jackets, it demonstrates how these garments, amongst others, and one's choices are the very stuff of culture itself.

For this reviewer, it was fascinating how the author elected to concentrate each chapter's thematic purview on an important space in the life of all collegians. The five venues under consideration – popular culture, the classroom, the dorm, the dance and the gym – helped to define the eagerness of students to adopt and adapt comfortable clothing befitting their environments of work, rest and play. While this seems a useful and productive way to organize the material culture of campus life, I was left wanting and needing more of a theoretically nuanced discussion of the ways in which space works in and through its agents. Given the rich

literature on the study of space, cultural studies and geography and given that the author herself has contributed an invaluable essay to a volume devoted to the subject of the places and spaces of fashion, it seems like a missed opportunity not to have worked through the issue itself further. Moreover, given that the field of fashion studies, which cuts across numerous disciplines including history, has blossomed over the past decade to provide us with countless inspired texts, it was unfortunate that Clemente did not avail herself of this literature; particularly useful would have been those studies attending to the complicated relationship between fashion and identity. After all, if there is one conclusion that Clemente draws at the end of nearly every chapter, it is that the move away from formality toward comfortable and casual clothes brought the increased individuality collegians sought for their wardrobes. Her conclusions, therefore, left this reviewer wanting more than a string of historical facts and more critical analysis of the rich historical materials she so ably draws from.

The book, however, provides some compelling and fascinating discussions of race and gender throughout. The issue of race and its differing impact on campus fashion is brought out with the examples of Spelman and Morehouse, historically black colleges, which both placed considerable emphasis on simplicity, particularly as it concerned party dressing. Simplicity, for these colleges, signified respectability and became an important means to combat white perceptions of African-American's purported fondness for bright colors and outlandish patterns or more poignantly, 'the proneness of the Negro for pomp and display' as one administrator put it (p. 50). Fashion, for many administrators was deemed 'morally dangerous' (p. 64), and as result campus administrators throughout the United States were often at odds with student desires and choices.

Much to her credit, Clemente focuses her attention on both men and women, which is all too often not the case in studies on historical fashion. Through her various readings of fashion choices for campus venues, however, she clearly shows the different experiences of gender and the perceptions that resulted. As early as 1910, clothes once confined to the sports arena were now the mainstay throughout campuses. Shorts and sweaters, staples in the athletic collegian wardrobe made also their way into the mainstream and became a regular part of the suburban family weekend, whether picnicking in the park or barbecuing in the backyard. However, as Clemente demonstrates, though male and female students who wore shorts and sweaters were met with social criticism both on- and off-campus, the tone and the nature of this criticism was markedly different. Men seen in Bermuda shorts were deemed 'silly' while their female counterparts were said to look 'sloppy', their chosen garments deemed 'unflattering' and 'unfeminine' (p. 108). As with many emerging collegians' sartorial choices, a woman's femininity was called into question, whereas men's masculinity was rarely the subject of debate.

Through the various themes of each chapter, the author also importantly explores the ways collegians' choices and their gradual rebellion against dress codes outside the walls of academia were often a result of flaunting moral and social codes. Gender equality, or often the absence thereof, is often highlighted in the way campus deans and administrators attempted to control and codify clothing, with this being especially evident in co-ed institutions. According to Clemente it was on university campuses that American women began to wear pants and even jeans to venues like the cafeteria, much to the consternation and dismay of administrators. For their part, men flaunted institutional rules by wearing sweaters and khakis to the classroom. The new spaces and customs of courtship were another important area of change. Here, as in all other aspects of collegiate life, the formality of the tuxedo was replaced by flannel shirts, penny loafers and trousers. Formal dances made way for a new sort of date night, often taking place in the cinema. In the end, in very different ways, both men and women were equally engaged in redefining not only their own wardrobes and lifestyle, but that of all Americans regardless of whether they were ready for it or not.

Dress Casual is a serious and genuine contribution to the history of American fashion and cultural life precisely because it traces one of the most significant ways Americans became associated globally with sportswear. Perhaps worthy of future investigation would be an examination of the collegians' impact on the growth and development of the American sportswear industry itself and by extension New York's epicenter of the trade, Seventh Avenue. After all, the importance of college students cannot be underestimated, for as

Clemente reminds her readers their population more than doubled between 1940 and 1960 from 1.5 to 3.7 million (p. 13).

More than ever before collegians were not interested in the mores, morals, patterns and rituals of the previous generation, but by mid-century sought to determine their own paths and demand new sartorial options. While their seemingly consistent goal was to incorporate more individuality into their clothing and style, it must be said that they also assumed a new equally uniform style in the process. Part of the take-charge ethos of emerging youth culture also meant students wanted to control their own wardrobes, much to the dismay of the well-wishing mothers who often sent care-packages of new clothes. For the university student of the 20th century, who knew better than the students themselves? After all, college life had become an entirely new, unprecedented lifestyle, which broke all the former rules their parents and grandparents once knew. Practicality, versatility, comfort and casualness became the hallmarks of the collegian who was also keen to embrace the more affordable synthetic fibers on the market. Durable and less expensive, synthetic fabrics ushered in a whole new way of building a collegian and by extension American wardrobe. Chemistry, after all, according to Dupont, could change the face of America. As Clemente rightly and smartly concludes her study: 'The mass adoption of causal style does not reflect cultural change. It is cultural change' (p. 145).

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