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Book Review

Deirdre Clemente. *Dress Casual: How College Students Redefined American Style*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 208 pp. Cloth $29.95.

As I read Deirdre Clemente's *Dress Casual: How College Students Redefined American Style* in July 2014, I wore casual clothes: t-shirts, short-sleeved button-down shirts, shorts, and pajamas. I would have likely worn jeans, khaki pants, and a sweater if I had read the book in a colder month. What I learned from *Dress Casual* was that the clothes I wore—the clothes that most of us wear—were "born on the college campus in the first half on the twentieth century" (p. 1). Indeed, college students chose clothes that would soon be worn on the weekends by adults before largely overtaking Americans' wardrobes, including those who dressed for white-collar business jobs during the week. Clemente stitches together this history from a variety of sources, including college students' letters and diaries, fashion magazines, clothing manufacturers' trade publications, campus newspapers, and historical clothing that is now part of museum collections. The resulting book breaks from the historiographical tendency of determining how developments in the larger society influenced college students to show how decisions made by college students affected adults.

Dress Casual is organized thematically, with each chapter beginning at the turn of the twentieth century and going through the 1960s. Clemente begins her book by focusing on the public perceptions of college students' fashion—how it was portrayed in popular culture and (attempted to be) shaped by the fashion industry. At the beginning of the century, the fashion industry and magazine writers targeted the parents of college students, perceiving their purse strings to hold a powerful sway over collegians' attire. However, it became increasingly apparent that college students made clothing decisions often independent of their parents' wishes, if not their wallets. But fashion industry leaders had a difficult time understanding collegians' style preferences, so they worked to directly incorporate college students into the industry. Retailers in college towns hired popular students, including star athletes, and recent graduates to sell the latest trends. Department stores in large cities sectioned off part of their property to be a "college shop" and hired "advisory boards" of prominent students to "approve" their merchandise. Manufacturers sponsored contests for college students to design clothes. Fashion magazines hired student editors to give their annual back-to-school issues legitimacy among undergraduate readers.

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Clemente's remaining chapters—"On the Campus," "In the Dorm," "On a Date," and "In the Gym"—take readers to a specific location or event to demonstrate how college students' clothing choices changed and how these decisions influenced the larger American wardrobe. College men's contributions to casual style occurred in the classroom, as they replaced wearing suits with sport coats and mismatched pants to class in the early twentieth century. Eventually, sport coats gave way to t-shirts and sweatshirts by the 1950s. College women's fashion struggles centered over wearing pants and jeans, especially in the cafeteria. On the whole, college students emphasized comfort and durability in their clothing selections, and no where was this more true than the clothes they wore in their residence halls. On-campus living provided college students an opportunity to learn the prevailing styles on campus, to design and sew their own clothes, and borrow their friends' garments. Residence halls served as a (mostly) private space in which students could try out new styles that were unlikely to catch the eye—much less the ire—of campus administrators.

College students wore these new styles outside their residence halls to their public engagements. As college students' courtship shifted from intermittent formal dances, epitomized by the junior prom, to more regular, less formal house parties, dances, and movies, their clothing followed a similar path toward informality. Instead of tuxedos and evening gowns that could only be worn to formal affairs, college students chose "versatile clothing that served a variety of occasions" (p. 94). College men mostly selected dark suits that could be worn both on dates and to job interviews, while college women bought cocktail dresses that could be worn to dates or other social occasions. Moreover, college women's less formal dating attire also became more revealing at the same time that college students enjoyed increased privacy in their dating. College students created the ultimate casual style by transforming clothes traditionally worn to a private activity on campus—gym class—into street clothes. Sweaters were the first type of athletic apparel that college students popularized wearing in public. The popularity of shorts among collegians proved much more controversial than sweaters, especially for women. The press covered and criticized college women wearing shorts to gym class, and college women faced opposition by many campus administrators to their wearing Bermuda shorts in public in the late 1940s. The parents of college students in the 1940s complained about students wearing Bermuda shorts, but a decade later, they often wore similar shorts alongside their collegian sons and daughters.

As the controversy surrounding the widespread adoption of shorts suggests, college students faced scrutiny from a variety of sources as they remade American style into a casual affair. Fashion designers and department store buyers tried to impose more formal and fitted clothes

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on college students. Deans of men and deans of women enforced dress codes that made many college students' style innovations, at least initially, crimes on campus. Students at Penn State, for example, contested dress codes that controlled the wearing of shorts through the mid-1960s. College students ultimately won the freedom to wear shorts whenever they pleased, but many years passed between the popularization of shorts and the relaxation of dress codes, leaving a generation of students to cover their legs or face the consequences of breaking campus rules. Even college men complained when college women wore "unfeminine" clothing such as baggy sweaters and pants.

Many of these clothing controversies centered on efforts to control college students, and Clemente's most significant arguments center on how this control had an inverse relationship to privilege on—and between—campuses. Wealthy, white men attending the nation's most elite institutions enjoyed the greatest freedoms over their clothes. Unlike their wealthy peers at private colleges who could afford to own a variety of styles and multiple garments within the same style, white middle-class men attending coeducational public universities often selected durable, casual clothes as a cost-saving measure, although these were the same students who could be especially hostile toward their female peers for adopting a similarly relaxed wardrobe. Women students attending rural single-sex colleges, especially those of the Seven Sisters that were not connected to a men's college, faced fewer hurdles than other college women in going casual. Their early adoption of casual style resulted from the indifference of their campus administrators toward their dress, the absence of college men to complain about their wardrobes, and these wealthy women's ability to afford to buy both casual clothes for class during the week and more formal clothes for dates on the weekend. Students at historically black colleges and universities, such as the Christian and conservative Spelman and Morehouse, endured stricter dress codes well into the 1960s. In another mark of privilege, *Dress Casual* focuses on the most prominent colleges and universities within the distinct types of institutions of the American higher education system—Princeton and the Seven Sisters among northeastern private institutions, Penn State and UC-Berkeley among coeducational public universities, and Spelman and Morehouse among historically black institutions—leaving readers and perhaps future historians to wonder how these fashions pervaded less elite campuses over the last century.

But the relationship to college students, casual style, and privilege was not just confined to the campus. In her book's most compelling concluding point, Clemente notes that Americans' adoption of casual style resulted in fashion choices that favorably reflected our democracy, with fewer distinctions in clothing between and across genders, races,

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and socioeconomic statuses—but this adoption coincided with the production of our clothes leaving our country. Imports rose from 3 percent of the clothes Americans wore in 1965 to 97 percent in 2011, and many of these clothes were made in undemocratic places and spaces.

By the 1960s and 1970s, college campuses were increasingly diverse and casual style had pervaded American culture. College students began to prize individuality over conformity, largely rejecting the efforts of fashion designers and retailers. As a result, the fashion industry shifted its focus to teenagers, whose buying power was much larger than their representation in the larger population. Yet Deirdre Clemente has written a book that demonstrates the remarkable influence college students' clothing choices had on the American wardrobe. In doing so, she makes those of us who are studying college students of the past or working with college students of present consider the ways in which these young but influential people have shaped and are shaping society.

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