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*DRESS AND IDENTITY IN AMERICA: THE BABY BOOM YEARS 1946-1964*,  
DANIEL DELIS HILL (2024)

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### **Biography**

Dr. Elizabeth Kealy-Morris is senior lecturer in dress and belonging at Manchester Metropolitan University in Manchester, United Kingdom. Through her research, she seeks connections between dress, cultural memory, identity, exclusion and belonging. She is Associate Editor of *Fashion, Style and Popular Culture*, guest editor of its 2026 special issue 'Dressing Through Pandemics', and co-editor of Bloomsbury's 2023 publication *Memories of Dress*. Her research has featured in *Le Monde*, *The Conversation* and *The Guardian*.

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Daniel Delis Hill's *Dress and Identity in America: The Baby Boom Years 1946–1964* offers a nuanced exploration of American fashion as a lens for understanding cultural transformation during the Baby Boom era in the USA spanning the years in the book's title when this generation was born. The book traces how sociopolitical shifts, economic prosperity, and cultural dynamics influenced fashion and identity during this period as well as foundational experiences in early childhood during the 1930s Great Depression era. Throughout the text, Hill consistently highlights how American fashion during the Baby Boom years reflected broader themes of cultural identity and the emergence of distinct, uniquely American styles. The author explores how clothing choices symbolized the societal norms, values, and aspirations of the era while also engaging with countercultural movements that sought to redefine or resist these norms. Hill's interdisciplinary approach, bridging history, sociology, and fashion studies, provides a solid platform for analysing the era and contributes to discourse within fashion studies on the how relationship between socio-political and economic societal developments impact style, dress and identity.

The text is structured around five core themes: (1) the place of hardship during the Great Depression in setting gender role definitions and expectations for this generation; (2)

masculinity and dress in the post-Second World War America; (3) ethnic identity and dress; (4) women's fashion and the post-war domestic ideal; and (5) youth fashion and the emergence of baby boomers as a generation of consumers seeking The American Dream. With the first chapter, 'The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit: Growing Up', Hill contextualizes Depression-era values and their lasting influence on postwar male identities, emphasising how nostalgia for the hardships and resilience of the 1930s informed not only male identities but also broader societal expectations. This collective memory shaped dress norms that foregrounded practicality, neatness of appearance, and a sense of propriety, reflecting an aspiration to sustain the perceived moral clarity and stability of the earlier era. He draws on foundational Depression-era sociological research undertaken by Robert S. and Helen M. Lynd (1) (1937) to argue that nostalgia for the stability and moral clarity of the 1930s profoundly shaped the understanding and performance of postwar masculinity. Hill argues that this ethos found expression in the restrained aesthetics of mid-century men's suburban fashions, which emphasized formality and respectability.

Chapter 2 focuses on the swift socio-economic cultural changes taking place in everyday life emerging from the end of the Second World War with a critical exploration of the influence of the 'GI Bill' on postwar life in facilitating veterans' reintegration into civilian society through access to education, housing and stable employment. Hill notes that for working-class soldiers this support was not available to their families during the Great Depression, and many became the first in their families to gain a high school diploma or a college degree with this government assistance. In Hill's analysis there was a nostalgia for prewar domestic ideals expressed as a longing for the perceived stability, simplicity, and clearly defined gender roles of the pre-World War II era. This nostalgia reflects a societal yearning to recapture a sense of order and familiarity after the disruptions of the war. Hill suggests that this reverence for paternalistic domestic life significantly influenced postwar suburban culture, including clothing trends. Suburban attire, for both men and women, was carefully curated to visually embody these values of domestic stability, family unity, and traditional gender roles.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Hill moves into a detailed analysis of men's fashion trends, situating fashion with broader cultural shifts such as the 'British Invasion'. Chapter 3 is focused on exploring styles adopted by countercultural groups like beatniks, bikers and gay-coded 'Lavender Lads' (63) all of which reflected an alternative cultural identity that

contrasted with the mainstream which he argues caused a crisis in masculinity as was acknowledged, promoted, and protected at the time. Hill effectively frames clothing as a medium for both resistance and the renegotiation of traditional masculinity, offering a convincing analysis of nonconformist styles through introducing examples from popular culture including cinema and advertising media of the time. In Chapter 4 Hill considers the influences of the Ivy League and Mod styles on post-Second World War menswear. He notes that while suburban clothing trends during this time often contrasted with these shifts by emphasising practicality and uniformity, this exchange between local norms and global influences demonstrates the adaptability of suburban fashion to cultural shifts.

Chapter 5, 'Ethnic Men's Identity and Dress', shifts focus from predominantly white middle-class experience to Black Americans' influence on post-Second World War culture and resultant fashion styles. Hill carries out an analysis of the cultural significance of the zoot suit and soul style, highlighting how the Civil Rights Movement underscored political symbolism of clothing. Arguing that soul style became a form of resistance, he suggests that it embodies pride and defiance against the systemic oppression and violence experienced by Black Americans for centuries, and at this point, through Jim Crow segregation tactics. A strength of this chapter is the effective use of visual and historical evidence to explore dress as resistance. However, weaknesses include a missed opportunity to discuss Latino and Asian American experiences and use of clothing to express their heritage and political struggles for equal access to The American Dream and the limited acknowledgment of intersectionality with ethnic identities and experiences.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 concentrate on the shifting social role of Baby Boomer women and the ways in which their dress reflects this via uniquely American styles. In Chapter 6 Hill discusses the wartime expansion of women's roles and the subsequent postwar retrenchment into domesticity. He examines how media representations and fashion reinforced traditional gender roles, offering a critical perspective on the societal pressures faced by women.

Women's fashion during the Baby Boom years reflected a cultural negotiation between the wartime expansion of roles and the postwar retrenchment into domesticity. Hill examines how American ideals of femininity shaped women's clothing, with styles like house dresses and tailored skirts emphasizing modesty and functionality. These designs reinforced traditional gender roles while also adapting to the needs of modern American women, highlighting the interplay between cultural identity and practicality. In Chapter 7,

Hill delves deeper into the dual functions of women's attire as both a reinforcement of societal expectations and a subtle means of resistance. The emphasis on homemaker fashion reflects a distinctly American model of domesticity, with clothing that symbolized unity and stability within the nuclear family. However, Hill also notes how some women used fashion to express individuality, subtly challenging the cultural constraints of the era. I felt the separation of genders in the structure of this text is a weakness that raises issues of missed opportunities, generalizations, and another case of lack of acknowledgement of intersectional experiences in everyday social identity development. There is minimal engagement with the emerging feminist critiques of the period which many Baby Boom generation women and men engaged in through lead the fight for equality, equal pay, and reproductive freedom. Chapter 8 provides an account of women's postwar fashion, from Christian Dior's early postwar New Look style to the Mod styles of the 1960s, emphasising their cultural significance on postwar sartorial silhouettes. The growth and key role of Seventh Avenue during the Second World War to design and dress the nation while occupied France's borders were closed is mentioned only briefly (157) which limits his argument that suburban casualwear is a uniquely American aesthetic (see Kealy-Morris 2025). Hill discusses briefly the technological innovations of that time which married efficient practicality with the casual restraint of suburban style. The lightweight, easy-care qualities of synthetic fabrics catered to the needs of busy domestic life, while also reflected the modernity and progressiveness associated with the suburban ideal.

In Chapter 9, the final chapter, the rise of the youth market and its influence on fashion is explored. Hill critiques the gendered marketing strategies that shaped Baby Boom era children's clothing, linking these trends to broader societal norms. This dynamic often reflected nostalgic attempts to preserve traditional gender roles amidst societal change, as boys' and girls' clothing reinforced distinct roles through colour schemes, design elements, and marketing narratives aimed at maintaining clear gender boundaries. Within the chapter there is a strong connection between consumerism and childhood identity and an engaging critique of gender role socialisation through dress. However, there is a limited focus in the chapter on non-white and immigrant children and their consumer experiences

In summary, Hill's *Dress and Identity in America: The Baby Boom Years 1946–1964* is an important contribution to the study of fashion and cultural identity. Its interdisciplinary approach, combining history, sociology, and fashion studies with highly effective use of

visual and historical evidence through popular culture media, provides a rich analysis of the Baby Boom years. Hill's work effectively illustrates how fashion reflects and reinforces societal norms and shifts and adeptly demonstrates the ways in which fashion functions as both a reflection and a driver of societal change and, in particular, American cultural identity. By examining the tensions between tradition and change, the text offers a nuanced perspective on the role of clothing in shaping societal norms and individual identities. While certain areas warrant deeper exploration, this book remains a foundational resource for scholars investigating the intersections of dress, culture, and identity in mid-20th-century America. Future research could build on Hill's foundation by incorporating more diverse cultural and class perspectives, experiences and influences. The book remains an important resource for understanding the interplay between dress and identity in pre- and post-war America.

## References

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