

# My Jeans, Myself, and I

Randall Lavender

A serious fashion crisis recently struck me: I began to question my constant reliance on jeans—blue ones, to be exact—as the ideal, all-purpose work, play, and everything-in-between attire. I have worn jeans for all occasions over some twenty-five years: as an artist, a writer, a parent, a college teacher and administrator. But for reasons I am still struggling fully to comprehend, I suddenly found myself thinking I really *should* wear something more, well, respectable—at least to the office. So I actually decided to try not wearing jeans every day.

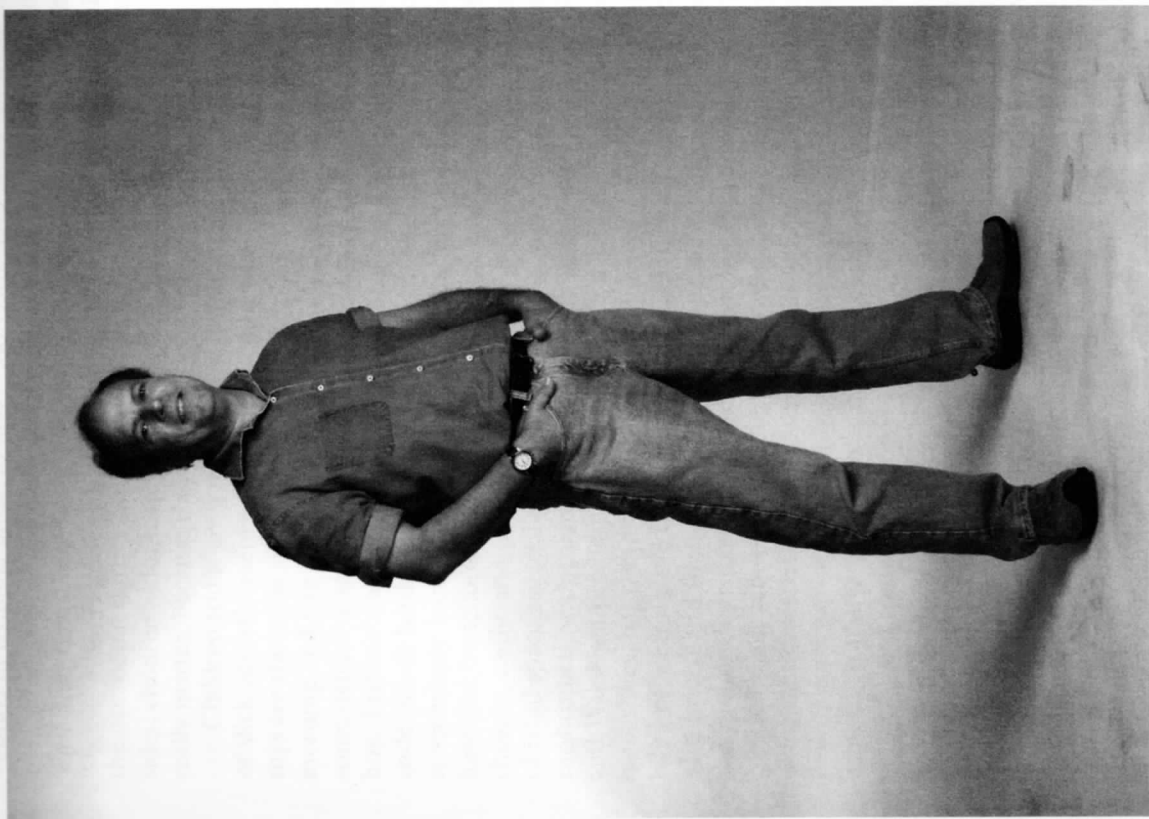
It may have been my forty-fifth birthday that sounded the alarm. After all, for a man of my age to run around in blue jeans day in and day out, leading meetings and teaching classes, at home and at work, raises certain questions. Have I not fully grown up, perhaps? Am I not a successful adult, and if I am, should I not dress accordingly? Such questions crept into my consciousness as I began to reckon with becoming middle-aged and with the mix of my roles and responsibilities. These questions actually led to a concerted attempt at dressing “better.” I started noticing how other men my age dress, and I soon found myself wandering the men’s floor in department stores, where beautiful, respectable corduroy pants and pressed linen slacks caught my eye, beckoning me to join the ranks of men who had made it, men who had achieved more than simple blue jeans could reflect. Maybe it was time to step up to my rightful place and stop dressing like the college art student I once was.

It didn’t last long. Despite my best efforts over close to a year’s time, it turned out I simply couldn’t resist falling back, one groggy morning at a time, into my trusty blues, so well molded to my body, so seemingly suitable for the vast array of activities I find myself engaged in most days.

In observing my undeniable attachment to these mysteriously magnetic, all-purpose denim pants, I found that the same questions that had led me to attempt a change of garb still rattled around in my head, unanswered. To this day, even though I have long since capitulated to blue jeans’ dominance of my personal wardrobe, I still need to address more fully the questions that led me to dare setting them aside in the first place. Why did I do it—reject my beloved denims? And why did my good intentions go unfulfilled in the end—why did I fail at dressing “better?” An art historian friend of mine, who is well versed in semiotics, put it best when she pointedly asked, “If blue jeans won the title of most-frequently-worn even after your attempts at replacing them, what are they *saying*?”

## WHY DID I REJECT MY BELOVED DENIMS?

Many years ago, I went to art school to study ceramics. I was a potter, a sculptor. The life of an undergraduate art student revolved largely around studio



Randall Lavender in his own jeans. (Photo: James Stiles.)



**Figure 1.** The term denim is derived from the heavy cotton “sarge de Nimes” that Levi Strauss used to manufacture overalls which were marketed to workmen like these California miners, ca. 1890. (Photo: Levi Strauss & Co. Historical Collection)

courses and art-related activities, which included loading and carrying messy art supplies and experimenting with various raw materials. My average day consisted of whatever classes and tasks had to be attended to, followed by what I loved doing: working on my art. Of course, jeans were entirely in order—kilns, clays, and glazes made of staining refractory pigments were everywhere. I wouldn’t have wanted to smear all that on my neatly pressed gray Bugle Boys, which were kept reserved for gallery openings and formal dinners. Out of a habit instilled in me from childhood—safeguarding my “school clothes” by changing out of them as soon as I got home each day—blue jeans quickly became my surrogate skin. On my own at college, I no longer had “school clothes.” I needed only blue jeans, which allowed me to run from biology class straight back to a wet plaster casting in progress or from a meeting with an advisor to a roaring glass furnace, without concern for the clothes I was wearing. They were work clothes, but they were also, even by the dress standards of the early 1970s, perfectly acceptable for school.



**Figure 2.** Unlike the designer focus that contemporary ads for jeans feature, earlier ads emphasized the utilitarian aspects of the fabric and construction. LEE® Jeans ad (c. 1930). LEE is a registered trademark of the H. D. Lee Company, Inc. Used with permission of the H. D. Lee Company, Inc.

Indeed, jeans have always been for work, ever since Bavarian-born businessman Levi Strauss and Nevada tailor Jacob Davis received a patent over 130 years ago for an “Improvement in Fastening Pocket Openings,” after which they began manufacturing their copper-riveted “waist overalls” (Figures 1 and 2).<sup>1</sup> Soon other manufacturers, including the H. D. Lee Company, entered the overall market, offering similar sturdy work wear featuring solid rust-proofed metal buttons, reinforced thread riveting, and super-strong hidden seams. Early jeans, of course, were made of durable and comfortable blue denim. This material, now legendary, was synonymous with utility. In a turn-of-the-century *American Fabrics* magazine article, denim was touted as “an honest fabric—substantial, forthright, and unpretentious.”<sup>2</sup> By the 1920s,

<sup>1</sup> Levi Strauss & Co., *History of Denim Site*. Retrieved August 19, 2002, from [www.levistrauss.com/about/history/denim.htm](http://www.levistrauss.com/about/history/denim.htm).

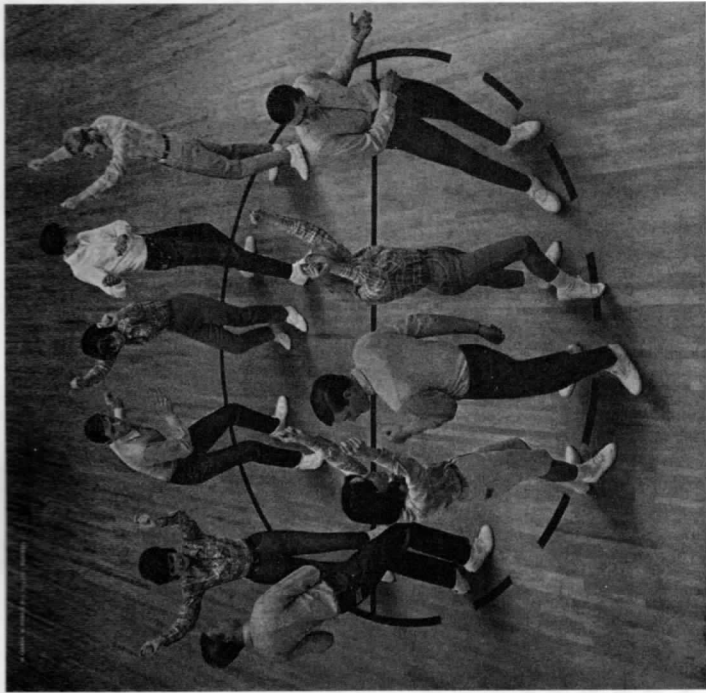
<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Levi's "waist overalls" were the leading men's work pants product in the western United States. Jeans were soon elevated to more mythic status when 1930s western movie stars such as John Wayne and Gary Cooper wore them, making them symbols of a life of independence and rugged individualism. And during World War II, American GIs had to guard their jeans overseas because the pants were so popular.

When the war was over, denim pants quickly became associated less with work and more with the leisure activities of a prosperous postwar society. From there, denim and jeans became symbols for the young, active, informal American way of life. By the 1980s, blue jeans had become a big part of the loosened-up, "no-collar workplace."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, by the end of that decade, "TBM, long known for requiring a necktie and a white shirt, endorsed business-casual dress, not just on Casual Fridays but everyday."<sup>4</sup> Today, millions of us wear jeans to work, where the suit once ruled. Yet for many of us, this love affair with jeans goes unexamined, even as remnants of the suit's reign linger beneath the surface—in our collective subconscious. How have we come to view jeans as so all-purpose (Figure 3)?

In my own experience, the nagging sense that I somehow needed to move "beyond" blue jeans to dress more formally grew out of a subconscious suspicion about jeans' ability to properly signify aspects of my identity that have developed over the years. Institutional affiliation, occupation, level of education, social status, and ideological persuasion can seem a lot to pile into one simple pair of pants. But I was, in a way, becoming aware that wearing jeans all the time did somehow "say" things about me that I wasn't entirely comfortable with anymore. I've since come to realize that I wasn't only seeking to convey other messages about myself in rejecting my jeans, but that I might also have been *rejecting something* about myself. And that warranted further examination.

As it happens, the very question of what I was really doing in trying to "improve" my dress related directly to some research I was doing at the time on certain historical influences on the field of art education. I discovered that one historical influence that had come to bias many educators had also contributed to my rejection of jeans and the corresponding rejection of certain aspects of myself that wearing jeans apparently connoted. This bias, defined by Diana Korzenik, viewed art as inferior to other subjects in the eyes of most educators, since "the ranking of prestige and priority of certain school subjects [renders] art . . . contaminated by [a traditional] disdain for work with the hands."<sup>5</sup> This bias extends far beyond the confines of art education or academic culture; it is present within culture at large. But surely I, an artist, a maker, a thinker about art and culture, would not subscribe to



the Wrangler Stretch is the dance to do

Figure 3. Wrangler ad (1964). (Photo: Wrangler jeans)

such a bias—not knowingly, at least. Nevertheless, I came to understand that I, too, exercised just this kind of bias when I rejected jeans. After all, I was judging them on the basis of how they reflected upon my maturity and level of achievement. No wonder I felt the need to replace them: I was judging the artist, the maker, the one who works with his hands (myself) in the very same way Korzenik suggests that culture judges these—with *disdain*.

## WHY DID I FAIL AT DRESSING "BETTER?"

For most of a whole academic year I wore only corduroy to work. With every step I took through every hall I walked, that corduroy "said" *Professor, Administrator, Middle-Class, Middle-Aged*. I had finally arrived at a place where some of my worldly attributes could be manifested through the expressive vehicle of dress. It was as if my clothes somehow affirmed something of who I'd become at that stage of life.

Interestingly, however, another set of questions arose that year, due to a creeping sense that I was actually wearing a kind of costume. Had something been lost in the change? Was that all there was to me—a teacher, a bureaucrat, a nine-to-fiveer? What about the artist? The writer? What about the

<sup>3</sup> Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 117.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Brown and Diana Korzenik, *Art Making and Education* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 126.

guy who has worked construction and found it as intellectually gratifying as most any other activity? What about the guy who cooks dinner, does the laundry, medicates a sick cat, and helps his seventh-grader with science projects? I might have come to terms with certain aspects of myself in my new corduroy garb, but it struck me that I was losing touch with other aspects of my identity in the process—aspects such as manual skill, love of hard work, and simple honesty. Somehow my view of myself as a creative, self-motivated, and independent person was slipping away, day by day, as my jeans lay neatly folded and stacked on a shelf. I wasn't aware of it at the time, but the temptation to slip back into my jeans on workdays gradually mounted—at first one day here, one there—until I'd "cheat" once a week, then twice, and so on with regularity until I finally gave up altogether. In the end, it seems, the dressier clothes simply weren't *me*.

This got me to wondering just how clothes reflect a person's identity. Of course, scholars have long identified connections between identity and dress. Sociologist Nathan Joseph explains the importance of a 1970s phenomenon: the *casual* look. "Clothes . . . described changes in feelings and identity—the expression of persona through dress," he writes. "Expression of the inward is more sincere and important than hypocritical conformity to the outward convention."<sup>6</sup> Could Joseph's notion of "outward convention" explain why I felt as if I were wearing a costume during my year out of jeans? Where age is concerned, it seems there are many conventions of dress, jeans having become a dominant one only in the early 1960s. In a 1963 *Journal of Home Economics* article, Karlyne Anspach suggests, "Casual clothes are *young* clothes. In them you . . . do things, have fun."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it seems that by the end of that decade, jeans were the hippest, coolest garments around. "Tough as a tumbleweed, trim as a rawhide thong and pre-shrunk to boot," reads one period advertisement for Wrangler jeans, contrasting sharply with a jeans ad of fifty years earlier that promised such enticing attributes as "longer wear, better fit, and more washings per garment."

If jeans had come to represent youth by the late 1960s, the next decade elevated them, along with other clothes, to even higher levels of expressive power. As Joseph explains, the mid-1970s designated clothes as "the individual's impression of himself rather than his definition of the situation, the latter being of secondary importance."<sup>8</sup> Identity, then, became a matter of finding the right kind of dress in order to "be yourself."

Perhaps this explains it. The gravitational pull that led me back to jeans was actually fueled by a need to express something of myself that, for whatever reason, was best expressed by that particular form of dress. Looking a little

deeper into the subject, I found Robert Lifton's characterization of what he calls "the protean man, a hypothetical contemporary man who is malleable vis-à-vis the tremendous forces of today's world, which expose him to far greater change than his ancestors ever encountered. This individual may undergo many ideological changes in his lifetime."<sup>9</sup> Lifton's protean man felt in many ways like a description of me. After all, I was a contemporary man who had undergone "far greater change" than any of my ancestors had, maybe even more than many of my friends. Inspired by a variety of endeavors through the years, my life and ideological perspectives evolved with each undertaking: from studying art through framing, wiring, and drywalling a large building, developing a real estate project, raising a daughter, writing, exhibiting original paintings and sculpture, along with much else along the way.

Lifton's protean man offered, perhaps, a model for how my own sense of identity had become frazzled by all the roles and activities of contemporary life. And it seemed to explain why I rejected certain aspects of my identity in favor of others or, worse yet, in favor of culturally defined conventions. Indeed, in the course of an average day, I'll go from a meeting with my college president into a classroom full of students working with concrete to my daughter's school play and back to my studio at home—just like any other contemporary, protean man or woman would. If Lifton's model partially explains why my attempt to replace blue jeans failed, perhaps a more complete explanation arises when the protean man is considered in light of another, more recent claim, offered by Joseph: "Dress is a means to express . . . identity regardless of context—jeans become the standardized dress for work, classrooms, theatre, and often formal occasions."<sup>10</sup> According to both Lifton and Joseph, then, jeans somehow manage to reconcile contemporary man's fragmented identity with the undeniably varied and expressive connotations of dress.

When one thinks about how strong the connections are between clothes and identity, between something so seemingly benign as a pair of blue jeans and something as loaded as personal expression, it is little wonder that jeans themselves have transformed over time from the mere workwear they once were into perhaps the hottest items available on the consumer market today. Amazingly, "blue jeans in the last thirty years have attained such worldwide popularity that they have come to be considered an American icon."<sup>11</sup> There are literally hundreds of brands and/or styles of blue denim jeans readily available for purchase online at the click of a mouse. All this may be due in part to what Anspach aptly identified when she wrote, "In blue jeans and [a] shirt, 'she' can become 'he'; the size 16 girl may be any age; the housewife is queen one minute, slave the next."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Robert Lifton, "Protean Man," *Partisan Review*, vol. 35 (1968), 13–27.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph, "Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication Through Clothing," 178.

<sup>11</sup> *Gentrification of Blue Jeans*. Retrieved August 19, 2002, from [www.chass.utoronto.ca/history/material\\_culture/ovnyth/index.html](http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/history/material_culture/ovnyth/index.html).

<sup>12</sup> Anspach, "The American Casual Dress," 255–257.

<sup>6</sup> Nathan Joseph, "Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication Through Clothing," *Contributions in Sociology*, 61 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 179.

<sup>7</sup> Karlyne Anspach, "The American Casual Dress," *Journal of Home Economics*, vol. 55 (1963), 255–257 (emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> Joseph, "Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication Through Clothing," 179.

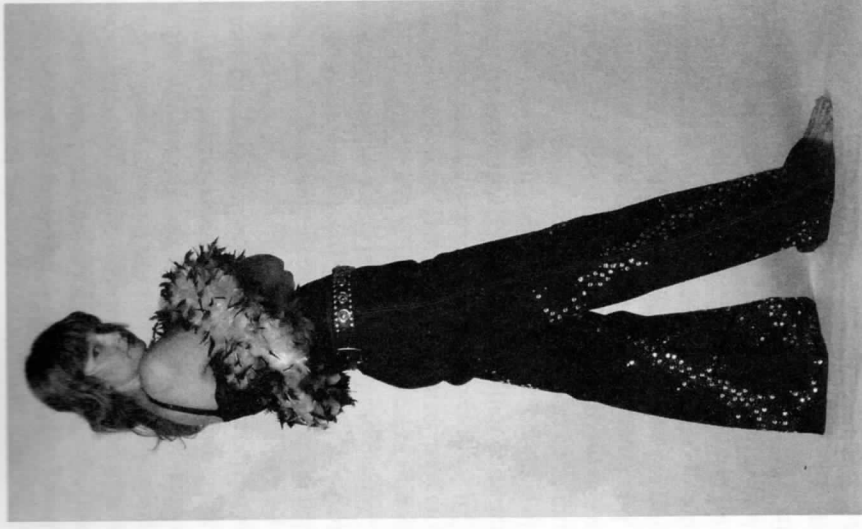
It may be that jeans not only help to reconcile a contemporary fragmentation of identity, but that jeans also express what Ruth P. Rubinstein calls a “wished-for identity.”<sup>13</sup> This means that jeans, and other kinds of clothes, can “enable a person to feel as if he or she personifies a desired social ideal.”<sup>14</sup> To imagine *who and what we want to be* (wished-for identity) relies on a set of assumptions and conclusions that are external to ourselves, such as societal prescriptions represented in idealized images by the media. By contrast, imagining *who we think we are* (identity) relies more on the internal set of assumptions and conclusions that constitute our definition of self.

In other words, clothes may connote more than our internal sense of individuality; they may reflect external influences such as our socially prescribed hopes, fears, and fantasies, as well. My failure to replace jeans as a primary form of dress may extend beyond issues of identity alone. Such personal connotations of meaning, it turns out, are only part of the picture. Another, deeper part is the kind of meaning jeans have that is culturally constructed.

### WHAT DO JEANS ACTUALLY MEAN?

With the links between clothing and identity, age, and gender in mind, it is also important to look at some larger social connotations of jeans and at their high place among the vast array of mass-marketed products available today. Sociologists tell us that clothing can be viewed as social artifact, a means of communication carried on through signs and symbols, or things that stand for other things. We are familiar with distinctive modes of clothing such as police or military uniforms, which we know were created consciously to signify authority and to designate social rank. Other distinctive modes of clothing that assign status, including jeans, have arisen gradually. A student recently remarked that she loved wearing “wife beaters,” a term that I later learned referred to men’s ribbed, sleeveless undershirts. Surely no one ever intended for such a seemingly innocent garment to carry such sinister connotations, but evidently culture defines these symbols on its own terms. And in light of the phenomenon of symbolism, one can easily imagine a myriad of culturally defined messages embodied in a simple pair of blue jeans (Figure 4).

The most conspicuous of these might be the sexual messages exuded by some of today’s jeans for women and girls, with waistbands so low and in-seams so short one could almost conclude the female human anatomy had magically evolved such that the navel now occupies a position higher on the abdomen than it did three years ago. As the provocative, hip-hugger clad pelvises of such pop icons as Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera prove, jeans can “say” as much about sexiness as was once reserved for lingerie. No



**Figure 4.** Nicole Hagen models jeans made by an Otis student. To communicate a sexier image, rhinestones have been applied and a feather boa is added to the outfit.

doubt marketers of such products know all too well the “value” of such apparently socially acceptable sexualization of young women and girls: The contemporary youth culture devours the super-tight, low-cut trend.

On a more general level, however, one response to the question “what do jeans mean,” offered from a sociological perspective, is that “jeans have variously meant membership in such groups or statuses as agricultural laborers, civil rights movements, youth subcultures, or foreign communist elites with access to Western consumer goods.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, jeans have meant a lot of things to a lot of people throughout recent history. But since all clothes communicate symbolically, what kind of information do they convey as *symbols*? In his article on symbols and their interaction in the lives of art students, Mark Salmon suggests, “Symbols convey information about a

<sup>13</sup> Ruth P. Rubinstein, *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 324.

<sup>14</sup> Rubinstein, *Dress Codes*, 332.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph, “Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication Through Clothing,” 1.

person's age, gender, social class, race, religion, ideological persuasion, institutional affiliation, occupation, level of education, social status and so forth.<sup>16</sup> This echoes earlier references to clothes and aspects of identity, yet Salmon's claim extends *beyond* personal identity to include much broader factors such as social class and social status. Identity and wished-for identity, it seems, are not the only uses for personal dress. As Rubinstein explains, the meaning of dress can be understood in terms of two other primary *uses*, as well: "to protect the personal self . . . and to proclaim one's personal values."<sup>17</sup>

The notion of *protecting* one's personal self with dress helps explain the temptation I felt to wear more formal clothing instead of blue jeans. Rubinstein's self-protection idea extends from psychologist J. C. Flugel's earlier observation that "When people find themselves among others who are unsympathetic or among people they feel superior to, have nothing in common with, or fear, they adopt mechanisms to protect the self."<sup>18</sup> The notion of "dressing better" makes a new kind of sense when considered in light of Flugel's point. For it was not merely the influence of some silly convention of fashion that led me to doubt wearing jeans; it was the influence of a culturally defined need to distance myself and, in fact, to *protect* my "self" from the world around me. In some way, according to Flugel and Rubinstein, I needed to dress differently to affirm my separateness. Therefore, the motivation behind my decision to dress differently was not only a function of my feelings about reaching middle age or having a certain job status or institutional affiliation; it was also a function of a socially motivated need to portray the authority and power these "positions" logically afford. Indeed, "Power and powerlessness, authority and lack of authority, are some of the earliest [social] constructs."<sup>19</sup> Upon realizing this, I'm just as glad now that I abandoned my effort to put aside blue jeans, since it seems that if I had succeeded, it likely would have produced only more isolation from students and colleagues at work.

The other motivation Rubinstein assigns to personal dress choices—that of proclaiming personal *values*—is also illuminating. Personal values consist of ideas and goals that are reflected both at the level of societal behavior and through personal conduct. Unfortunately, however, these two realms often do not wholly align. Societal behavior, on the one hand, exists to justify social class hierarchy, or the "rightness" of the unequal distribution of resources and associated pride in personal success. At the social level, for example, the accumulation of wealth, and the demonstration of it, are expected. On the other hand, the realm of personal conduct is oriented

toward egalitarianism and equality. In other words, personal conduct concerns emotional growth and the actualization of personal talents. My initial qualms about blue jeans may have been inspired, therefore, by the disparity of underlying orientations that motivate societal behavior and personal conduct. My struggle may have arisen out of a broader sense that my place in the world, on a societal level, was out of step with my personal values, my desire for connection, and my identity. So, as I folded and stored my jeans on that first day of what turned out to be my grand, failed experiment, I unknowingly forfeited some personal values with each fold, trading them for a temporarily overarching societal value—attempts to reflect through clothing my culturally defined role and status.

If jeans "mean" only one thing, then, it might well be that they bridge the competing desires for group identity and individual expression or personal conduct. After all, the need for group identity extends from societal values. By contrast, much of our personal conduct is driven by the need for individual expression. Jeans may have become the universally worn piece of clothing they are today precisely for this reason. Likewise, jeans may have become universally worn because "in the history of fashion, no other garment has served as an example of such status ambivalence and ambiguity."<sup>20</sup> It does seem that in choosing to wear jeans, one subordinates one's status to work, duty, and/or individual identity. What other item of clothing does the average truck driver have in common with the president of the United States, Bruce Springsteen, and most of the electricians in America? How many of the clothes my preteen daughter wears to school can she honestly say are also worn by Claudia Schiffer? As author Alice Harris puts it, jeans are basically "the one item of clothing just as likely to be found in the biggest mansion in town as in the most modest two-bedroom ranch."<sup>21</sup> Jeans bridge competing desires, as well as layers of society, gender, racial groups, social classes, and presumptions of status. In this way, they foster the expression of one's personal values, *without* treading on anyone else's in the process. Jeans are inclusive, trans-social, supra-uniform.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, perhaps my attachment to my jeans stems simply from the fact that they allow me to be myself, nothing more and nothing less, within a multitude of personal, social, and professional contexts, without the burden of having to "dress" for each one. Having been a creative person all my life, I grew up in jeans, studied in jeans, and now work in them. Fortunately for me and for millions of people like me all over the developed world, global culture has come to value "creative work" more than ever before, and dress

<sup>20</sup> *Gentrification of Blue Jeans*. Retrieved August 19, 2002, from [www.chass.utoronto.ca/history/material\\_culture/cynth/index.html](http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/history/material_culture/cynth/index.html).

<sup>21</sup> Alice Harris, Bob Morris Ben Widdicombe, and Joseph Montebel, eds., Diane and Joel Avirm, *The Blue Jean* (New York: PowerHouse Books, 2002), 111.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Salmon, "Symbolic Interactionism for Art Students," *Art & Academe*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1991), 29–45.

<sup>17</sup> Rubinstein, *Dress Codes*, 324.

<sup>18</sup> J. C. Flugel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 76–77, (originally published in 1930).

<sup>19</sup> Rubinstein, *Dress Codes*, 303.

codes have loosened in response. As Richard Florida explains, today's "creative economy no longer has one dress code."<sup>22</sup> In studying the layers of personally and culturally constructed meaning embodied in my blue jeans, I have discovered that attire can indicate either conformity or resistance to socially defined expectations, that appearance can be a cover for a real individual hiding underneath, and that clothes can provide a buffer between the public and private self. The implications of these kinds of discoveries for future designers of apparel seem vast, since in designing clothes, one designs symbols and signifiers for such human concerns as youth and maturity, compliance and disobedience, power and weakness, group inclusion and rugged individualism, not to mention coolness and nerdiness. To truly contribute to fashion design today, nothing less than full rigor is in order, as any legitimate contribution to that ever-changing field can, as I see it, grow only from a deep understanding of how the messages and meanings of dress form an ongoing dialogue with individuals and with culture alike.

## NOTES:

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<sup>22</sup> Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 119.

# GARB

A Fashion and Culture Reader



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PARME GIUNTINI



KATHRYN HAGEN