Blue Jeans and Apple Pie: The Symbolic Development of Blue Jeans in America

Jennifer S. James

Writer's comment: *Can you imagine your wardrobe without jeans? Jeans are one of the few clothing items that nearly everyone wears. Their popularity in our culture often leads us to take them for granted, overlooking their origin and symbolic meanings. I must admit that I hadn't given it much thought until I read "Of Maids' Uniforms and Blue Jeans" by Fred Davis for Textiles and Clothing 177 last fall. The following quarter, when I was assigned a research paper on any topic of my choice in English 20, I decided to pick up where Davis left off and study jeans in a little more depth. I hope you enjoy my paper as much as I enjoyed researching it. If this type of study interests you, you may want to check out Textiles and Clothing 107 or 177.*

Finally, I'd like to thank Eric Schroeder of the English Department and Joan Chandler of the Textiles and Clothing Department for their valuable guidance.

—Jennifer S. James

Instructor's comment: *I tell students that to write successful research papers they've got to first pick a topic that they like and then find good source material and appropriate it—that is, become intimate with their sources and incorporate them seamlessly into their papers. Not only did Jenni pick a topic that she liked—blue jeans—but she draws on an impressive variety and range of sources in tracing their history in American culture, moving effortlessly between sources as diverse as* Vogue *and* Qualitative Sociology, *and never do we feel that anything is extraneous or out of place. The essay not only offers us an intelligent analysis of a complex subject, but also constantly delights us with its details. In teaching us something new in every paragraph, Jenni shows that scholarship can be fun.*

—Eric Schroeder, English Department

The "typical" jeans wearer defies definition. Throughout their history, blue jeans have transcended nearly all class, age, occupational, and subcultural barriers. They are now, in essence, a universally accepted norm and perhaps America's greatest contribution to the fashion industry (Fiske).

One of the main appeals of fashion is the way clothing can be used as a form of communication. One's clothing can be used to express feelings of rebellion, to emulate others, or to adjust to the world as it changes. Most importantly, clothes serve as a form of identity expression. This communication is conveyed through a series of codes, where one type of appearance is generally understood to have a fairly specific meaning. Like fashion, these codes change continuously (Blumer; Kaiser *et al.*).

Reading appearance codes is especially difficult currently, in what is called postmodern culture. Postmodern culture is rife with ambivalence, with "its blurring of binary categories, and its intensified uncertainty on issues of social appropriateness" (Kaiser *et al.*). Current clothing codes reflect the more general feelings of cultural ambivalence. Not only can a garment convey a different meaning given the context of the outfit with which it is worn, but the same garment or outfit can signify multiple and often conflicting messages simultaneously.

This variety of messages is especially evident in the study of jeans. Over time, jeans have conveyed many meanings, but the overriding theme is that of Americanness (Fiske). As Becky Rupp points out, "Jeans are now as much a national symbol as the eagle and apple pie" (82). Jeans' strong association to Americana is most easily explained by the founding of jeans during the California gold rush, which epitomizes the American Dream (Berger).

Accounts of the founding of blue jeans conflict somewhat. Levi Strauss is often considered the inventor of blue jeans, but some accounts attribute the invention to a man named Jacob Davis. Levi Strauss immigrated from Bavaria to New York in 1847 and moved west to San Francisco in 1853 (Josephy). One story claims that Strauss brought heavy-duty fabric to the West, intending to sell it to miners for tents. Once Strauss learned of the miners' need for durable clothes, he used the tent canvas to make pants which came to be known as Levi's. Later on, Jacob Davis somehow entered the picture and added the rivets which gave the pants extra strength (Ley). In contrast to this rather folkloric story of the famous pants, another account presents a less romantic but more realistic version of the story. According to this more believable report, Strauss brought the fabric west to begin a dry goods business with his brother-in-law, David Stern. Their business grew and was quite a success, with sales of $3 million in 1866. One of their customers was Jacob Davis, an immigrant from Russia working as a tailor near Reno, Nevada (Josephy).

In filling a custom order for a very strong pair of pants, Davis unknowingly made the first pair of Levi's in 1870 and sold them for $3. The customer was so pleased with the durability of his pants that news spread quickly, and Davis was soon flooded with orders. He realized that the demand would grow beyond his capacity, but suspected that his suppliers would have the capital and business sense to help him meet the growing demand. Davis wrote to Strauss and Stern in 1872, and the three men received a patent for their "waist-high overalls" in May of 1873. They sold the first pair on June 5, 1873, with over 20,000 pairs sold by the end of the year. Sales more than tripled the following year (Josephy 34, 33).

The immediate popularity of Levi's was due primarily to their durability. Most customers were miners and manual laborers, whose clothes usually wore out quickly and tore easily. As advertised in 1884, Levi's were "excellently adapted to the use of those engaged in manual labor" (Josephy 34). The men had used heavy, sturdy fabric from Nîmes in France ("serge de Nîmes," Americanized to "denim"), reinforced the stress points with rivets, and double-stitched the seams with strong orange thread to match the rivets. The pants' metal buttons were embossed with the manufacturer's name, and two curving Vs were stitched across the back pockets (Josephy). This description of the original design is remarkably similar to that of the Levi's 501's available in stores today.

Levi Strauss and Company have since added a number of newer styles to their production and are now the largest apparel manufacturer in the country. Not only does the company's enormous success embody the American dream, but the origins of jeans also exemplify the cultural diversity of America. The name jean comes from the French word for Genoa, Genes. During the late 1800s, a garment similar to Levi's was worn by sailors from Genoa, Italy (Davis, "Of Maids'"). The French called them genes, and now Americans call them jeans. So jeans were made by immigrants from Bavaria and the Russia, out of fabric from France, and were named after Italian soldiers. Just as the people of America come from a variety of cultural backgrounds, so did the influences that created jeans.

The origin and nature of jeans linked them with American—specifically, western—ideals. This link consisted of the jeans' association with manual labor and its connotations of good, honest work valued by the Protestant work ethic. This association with manual labor continued until the 1930s, when a new twist was added. At this time, western movies were very popular and featured cowboy actors wearing jeans. In addition, vacationing at dude ranches had become popular among Easterners, who returned home with their new pants (Rupp 85).

These influences mark a distinct turning point. Jeans had been associated with western life, hard work, and cowboys, but now these ideals were romanticized. The vacationers who were starting to wear jeans were certainly affluent, since they were able to vacation during the depression of the 1930s. But despite their good fortune, they were trying to capture the (seeming) simplicity of western life. Jeans served as an escape from city life, enabling the wearer to identify with the western cowboy and the honesty of the country lifestyle (Rupp). The association with the West was not new, but now western images were romanticized—the harsh realities of this type of life were overlooked. These western ideals remain closely linked to jeans, but they took a back seat to the rebellious image of the jeans wearer which prevailed in the fifties and sixties.

The 1950s were marked by the appearance of several rebels in the media. In 1953, Marlon Brando starred as a member of a motorcycle gang in *The Wild One*. James Dean appeared in 1955 in *Rebel Without a Cause*. And, of course, there was Elvis (which Keenan points out is an anagram of Levi's). These young men symbolized rebellion and, of course, they wore blue jeans. This began a whole new wave of popularity for jeans. Jeans became part of a statement against society and "provided a channel of contempt toward the empty and conformist quietude of cold-war suburbia" (Ewen & Ewen 112). Ewen and Ewen point out the irony of jeans as a symbol of rebellion: "What had become a piece of Americana—blue jeans—became a rejection of Americana" (113). This is a recurring paradox. While jeans symbolize a rejection of popular culture, they are an inseparable part of that which they reject.

Since the fifties, jeans have been used in a number of ways to express rebellion. This theme continued into the 1960s, when jeans were worn as "a badge of aversion to society" (Murray 179) and became the uniform of the counter-culture. Wolman and Burks summarize this rebellious attitude in their introduction to a collection of Levi's art contest winners:

> The Parent Class didn't dig 'em. They looked cheap, especially on girls. They weren't *nice*. They sure as hell weren't "proper." Greasy rockers like Elvis wore them. The parent generation was turned off at the very thought. Which is doubtless why it felt so good to wear Levi's. (1)

The rebellion/conformity paradox surfaces again in the clothes as well as the actions of the counter-culture hippies. The jeans they wore were intended to signify their rebellion, while the garment itself had come to symbolize American society. By expressing their contempt for popular society, these social activists were simultaneously embracing the American way by exercising their First Amendment rights.

During the sixties, jeans also symbolized the women's liberation movement. "Rejecting the sex roles of convention, blue jeans were a feminist weapon against restrictive fashion, sexual objectification, passive femininity. . . . The cloth of labor became the emblem of liberation" (Ewen & Ewen 114). Jeans were thought to allow more freedom of movement, but more importantly, they showed a blatant disregard for traditional ideas of femininity. Despite the counter-culture movements, jeans became mainstream during the late sixties. This may be due in part to the huge advertising campaign by jeans manufacturers to rid jeans of their hoodlum or counter-culture image (Davis, *Fashion*). During this time, jeans began to cross class, gender, and age barriers. Jeans did not distinguish between social classes, allowing wearers to "be themselves" (Fiske 2). Paradoxically, in expressing themselves, people ended up wearing the same garment as everyone else, which masked their social differences. As Berger observes, "A person wearing blue jeans could be a truck driver or a neurosurgeon" (91).

Given the wide acceptance of jeans by the seventies, it is not surprising that the hippies soon found a way to differentiate their jeans. Jeans became an art medium, which people painted, embroidered, and embellished to express themselves (Wilson). This emphasis on individuality is contrasted by the uniformity of jeans within that subculture. The seventies were a time "at which a universal uniform [jeans] could *simultaneously* express the highest level of individualism. . . . Denim could distill the paradox of all fashion: that it must express both conformity and difference at one and the same moment" (Wilson 41). By this time, jeans had evolved from being a purely functional garment to one invested with several symbolic meanings. Up to this point, jeans had been closely associated with American ideals of democracy, hard work, equality, and freedom. But this entire symbolic structure was altered by the appearance of designer jeans in the late seventies.

Designer jeans made clear distinctions between social classes. One did not wear jeans, but wore Calvin Klein jeans, Jordache jeans, or Gloria Vanderbilt jeans. The designer's name blatantly displayed on the back pocket may as well have been a price tag, for the two were directly related, and one could easily be deduced from the other.

Appropriately, designer jeans surged in popularity during the 1980s, a time noted for materialism, obsession with money, and conspicuous consumption.

Designers robbed jeans of their democratic value by their commercialization. They became a way to distinguish between the privileged and the less fortunate. In addition, plain jeans had lost much of their value as rebellious symbols by their mainstream acceptance. Designer jeans also reversed the very characteristics for which they had been chosen to represent the women's movement. The proper fit was generally skin tight, "So snugly pulled over the posterior as to require some women to lie down to get into them. So much for comfort!" (Davis, *Fashion* 75). Jeans had become a kind of postmodern corset, restricting women and molding them into sexual objects once again. Jeans were "the vestments of liberated women, cut to impose the postures of Victorianism: corsets with the *look* of freedom and motion" (Ewen & Ewen 115).

The appearance and popularity of designer jeans presents a number of ambivalences. As Joan Chandler, Professor of Textiles and Clothing at University of California at Davis, points out, paying a high price for a garment which was originally intended for strictly functional purposes conveys a certain degree of ambivalence. Because jeans were still linked closely to ideals of the working class, wearing a garment with such associations and paying more for a special label demonstrates a great deal of status ambivalence. On one hand, the wearer wants to fit in with the working class, with its associations with honesty and hard work. But on the other hand, the label serves to differentiate the designer jean from ordinary or generic jeans. Thus, designer jeans allowed the wearer to fit in and to distinguish him/herself at the same time.

It would appear from their decline in popularity that the value of designer jeans as status markers has diminished, defeating the purpose of such displays. As Davis points out, the natural reaction to the designer jean was a hyper-loyalty to the original, Levi's 501's ("Of Maids'"). Levi's surged again in popularity in the mid-1980s, fueled by a number of events. Around this time, the styles of the sixties became popular again (Barol). In addition, Levi's introduced an advertising campaign modeled after a scene from *East of Eden*, which starred James Dean. This campaign revived jeans' association with the rebellion of James Dean as well as the western theme. Finally, Bruce Springsteen's album *Born in the U.S.A.* was released in 1984. The title of the album itself indicates a celebration of and pride in America. These ideas were also closely linked to the blue jean, as the album cover features Mr. Springsteen's backside, donned in jeans, with the red and white stripes of the American flag as a backdrop.

The reaction to designer jeans had a number of effects which form the basis of current jeanswear codes. The display of rebellion has become popular, as is consistent with the styles of the sixties. However, since jeans have also become mainstream, "if today's jeans are to express oppositional meanings, or even to gesture toward such social resistance, they need to be disfigured in some way" (Fiske 4). The most common forms of disfigurement are fading and tearing. By wearing jeans long after they would normally be replaced, individuals could signify resistance to a consumption-obsessed society. Thus, the rebellion/acceptance paradox is seen once again, "where what is to be resisted is necessarily present in the resistance to it. . . . So torn jeans signify both a set of dominant American values and a degree of resistance to them" (Fiske 4–5).

The original meaning of this rebellious movement has been diminished by its commercialization. By using processes like acid-washing, jeans manufacturers began producing jeans with the look of aged jeans. Now, the torn, ragged look was more of a fashion statement than a socio-political comment (Barol). This led to more differentiation between truly aged jeans and those which were artificially aged, as well as increased blurring of social status.

The look of poverty became a fashion statement, where "it cost more to look 'truly poor' than just ordinarily so, something which new jeans could easily accomplish by themselves" (Davis, "Of Maids'" 350). This blurring of social categories makes decoding the intended message more difficult, increasing the importance of the context in which a garment is worn. As an example, in his book *Trial*, Clifford Irving describes a man wearing "an army fatigue jacket with the insignia removed, and a pair of jeans with so many holes they would have been fashionable in Beverly Hills" (327). Irving's description could very well fit an upper-class man, but because this character is also described as a transient who "smelled of yesterday's beer and last week's body odor" (327), the reader knows this is not the case. While it may be fashionable to look poor, certain aspects of the appearance are maintained by the "fashionably" poor to ensure that their appearance will not be misinterpreted.

Accompanying this type of status ambivalence are the ideas of modesty and dressing down, where status is conveyed by an overt lack of concern for conventional status markers. Thus, "modesty and understatement in attire often come to be viewed as truer signs of superior social status than the lavish displays of finery and bejeweled wealth" (Davis, "Of Maids'" 343). This idea is summarized eloquently by Coco Chanel—"Women should dress as plainly as their maids" (qtd. in Davis, "Of Maids'" 340)—and is illustrated by Michael Jordan and his wife Juanita, who wore blue jeans to their wedding in September of 1989 ("Pair Jordan"). The overriding idea is that one should have the money and status to have a maid or an elaborate wedding ceremony, but modesty conveys such status more effectively and tastefully than extravagant displays. Beyond the realm of fashion, this reveals an interesting ambivalence ingrained in American culture, where one should strive for status and wealth but refrain from displaying it.

Another major reaction to the designer jean was the reappearance of the cowboy motif which accompanied the return to the more original style of jean. The country look gained popularity partially due to movies like *Urban Cowboy* and to country music, and more recently, to the popularity of country dancing. Of course, jeans (preferably Wrangler jeans) are a necessity of western attire. Wranglers have been "the cowboy's jeans since Wrangler went to some top rodeo riders 45 years ago to develop the perfect pair for them" (Pouschine 78). In the first eight months of 1992, Wrangler actually surpassed Levi's in terms of market share for the first time (Pouschine), indicating the importance of the country influence.

These romanticized aspects of the western cowboy are quite pervasive, both in the U.S. and abroad. The popularity of the western cowboy image is thought to partially explain the popularity of Levi's in Japan. A pair of authentic Levi's manufactured in the 1950s was selling for as much as $2,000 in Japan in 1991, whereas new Levi's retailed for $90 (Darnton & Takayama). This not only indicates the power of the western image, but also the status ambivalence related to the purchase of old jeans, which might be found at a thrift store for five dollars.

The western cowboy mystique is epitomized by Montana Broke jeans, which are available in New York and San Francisco. These used jeans, purchased from their original owners for $5, retail for about $65. The reseller guarantees that each pair has been "worn by bronc-riders, ropers, ranchers, and hands residing in the state of Montana." This guarantee is given in the leaflet which accompanies every pair of Montana Brokes, along with some insight: "The wear and tear of these jeans tells something about the Montanan who wore them. Use our guide to read the tracks . . . and leave the rest to the imagination." The leaflet continues with an explanation of the origins of the signs of wear. For example, a well-worn seat only indicates that the original owner "probably spent a lot of time riding horses and wore leather chaps to protect his legs" (qtd. in "Where Taxicabs").

The symbolic value of these jeans goes far beyond learning about the life of Montana cowboys. The purchaser is encouraged to use his/her imagination, suggesting a close identification with the original owner. As in the 1930s, these jeans allow urbanites to mentally escape to the wild west. Once again, the symbolic meaning is loaded with contradiction, as the thought of someone paying $65 for his/her worn out jeans is no doubt a source of puzzlement and humor for the original Montanan owner. As a result, the very people with whom the urbanites try so desperately to identify surely find their behavior laughable and ridiculous.

From a vehicle of escape to one of personal expression, jeans reflect the complexity of American postmodern culture by the multiple messages they convey. Although they began as a purely functional garment, jeans now symbolize the ambivalence most Americans feel about "appropriate" status and expressions of individuality and rebellion. Regardless of the specific messages sent by jeans, the underlying theme is usually very American. A message of elevated status symbolizes the success of the American Dream. A lower, working-class message conveys the honest work the gold rushers are noted for. Even expressions of rebellion against society are American, for if it weren't for the Constitution, they could not be expressed at all.

The symbolic development of jeans has paralleled that of American culture as a whole. Over time, American life has become more and more complex, as have the symbolic meanings of jeans. Elizabeth Wilson observes that "jeans are the ultimate 'empty signifier,' the symbolic vessel into which any and every aspiration about one's identity can be poured, the ultimate conveyor of that greatest fashion paradox: how to be just the same as, yet entirely different from everyone else" (41). Regardless of the message conveyed, "The jean is the most truly American piece of apparel in our costume history" (Murray 178).

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