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BLACK WOOL AND VINTAGE SHOES: THE WELLINGTON LOOK

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“He told me I didn’t look like I was from Wellington,” a friend, from a small town almost two hours away, confided to me over a cocktail in a downtown bar. This article asks, what is the Wellington look that this statement describes? How does it produce and reflect Wellington’s reputation as the locus of arts and politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand? It examines how the inhabitants of Wellington weave the fabric of the city together through their dress, analyzing how Wellington-based media, boutiques, designers, and locals together create a style that is distinctively ‘Wellington.’

“Il m’a dit que je n’avais pas l’air de venir de Wellington.” C’est ce qu’une amie venant d’une petite ville à deux heures de Wellington m’a confié il y a quelques années alors que nous partagions des cocktails dans un bar local. Cet article s’interroge: de quel aspect de Wellington est-il question dans une telle affirmation? En quoi exprime-t-il une idée de Wellington comme centre artistique et politique de Aotearoa/Nouvelle-Zélande? On y examine en particulier comment les habitants de Wellington définissent leur identité urbaine à travers leur style vestimentaire, à travers l’analyse des façons dont les boutiques et fabricants de Wellington créent un style qui se voudrait idiosyncrasie.



Deborah Sweeney, “Lost Love”,
Autumn/Winter 2013

I love this city, the hills, the harbour, the wind that blasts through it. I love the life and pulse and activity, and the warm decrepitude... there's always an edge here that one must walk which is sharp and precarious, requiring vigilance.

Patricia Grace, *Cousins* (1992)

“Too much black!” the massage therapist summarized. Lying naked while the therapist gave her damning opinion of Wellington as a city drained of colourful dress, I felt sheepish as I went to pay, fully dressed in black. Of course I was. I’m a Wellingtonian. I was born in Wellington city, but left when I was a babe. I returned at the turn of the millennium, sixteen years old and alone, to find my birthplace filled with inhabitants that appeared as though they had stepped off a fictional 1960s space station with their silver and black garb and asymmetrical haircuts. Having spent my life in both Sydney (Australia) and in the provincial New Zealand town of Hastings, it struck me that Wellingtonians dressed like no group I had seen. What are the cultural matrices—the “very special circumstances” as Christopher Breward (11) terms the emotional, economic and aesthetic factors that produce London’s fashion—that shape the dress practices of Wellingtonians? This article explores the “special circumstances” of the Wellington look through an examination of my personal experiences of having “live[d] the city” (Donald 8), the “arts of existence” (Foucault, *Use of Pleasure*, 10) of young Wellingtonians as they (per)form their identities in and through the ‘ethics’ of the city, and the work of three Wellington-based fashion

designers. I take inspiration from Susan Ingram and Katrina Sark’s book *Berliner Chic* and their assertion, following the work of Ulrich Lehmann, that the distinctiveness of place *matters* (17, my emphasis). Through Lehmann, Ingram and Sark remind readers that Paris is not Berlin is not Prague (17). Or, to locate this phrase within the trajectories of both colonization and my childhood, Wellington is not Sydney is not Hastings is not London.

Wellington: The “Best Little Capital”

This article concentrates its analysis on the inhabitants of the Wellington city centre. While I attempt to capture Wellington’s cultural specificity, it is important to note that the city is always in flux, and, as such, “hovers beyond the possibility of simple representation, but is never yet reducible to a series of simulacra” (Wolfreys 7). Traces between institutions, climate, boutiques, designers, and the populace of the city can be made.

Like many cities in the West, Wellington has been gentrified. Refurbished pristine heritage buildings housing Non-Government Organisations border one end of the central business district, while glass and steel buildings bearing the names of multinational corporations reflect the sky at the other end of the city centre, pushing into the Parliament buildings in a fitting tribute to the work that successive neoliberal governments have done to accommodate these corporations. The workers’ cottages have been removed and the substandard housing and rumoured drug dens of the central city have long

been replaced by fast-food joints, fine-dining establishments, and elegant bars. The contemporary inhabitants of the city are overwhelmingly middle class, and predominantly white. They work in and frequent the offices, government buildings, art galleries, boutiques, cafes, and schools of the city.

The capital of New Zealand, Wellington is known for its wind and for its beehive-shaped Parliament. It is a small city, with a population of 205,000 (“Facts and Figures”). The city centre can be traversed by a brisk walker in just over half an hour. Wellington’s climate is ‘mild’ if the ferocious wind that often whips through the city is ignored. Temperatures rarely rise above 25 degrees Celsius, or below zero degrees. Wellington is the site of New Zealand’s national museum and archives, as well as the site of national governance. It is not a city that populates fashion discourse. Indeed there are t-shirts available in the traditionally working-class central suburb of Newtown making light of this point, inserting the suburb comically into the familiar fashion city roll: “London, Paris, Milan, New York, Newtown.” While Wellington is not institutionally established on the fashion calendar, holding its first fashion week in 2012, it is a city of style. This can be seen not only in the dress of Wellingtonians, but in the city’s distinctive architecture and the proliferation of art galleries, libraries, and museums that showcase visual culture.

The predominant colour palette of Wellington dress is dark; black fills the cafes and offices of the city. Black is a colour that can at once mark the wearer as

an insider and an outsider. Crossing class and gender lines, black allows the wearer to traverse multiple sites and multiple subject positions, many seemingly contradictory. It is the colour of New Zealand’s national sports teams (giving the All Blacks rugby team its name, for instance) and it is the colour associated with intellectuals, anarchists, Māoritanga, artists, office workers (who are frequently referred to as ‘suits’), bikers, and punk, goth, emo, and metal subcultures. This manifold and expanding relationship between black and multiple identities is particularly useful in Wellington whereby a significant portion of the inhabitants are public servants who must enact the policies of successive governments and are contractually obliged to remain seemingly politically neutral. Black allows such workers to fit into both their ‘neutral’ work identities and their less-neutral post-work lives. Black signals both categorical and ontological identity, including, at times, New Zealand’s national identity.

Utilizing the connotations of the colour black, Wellington produces itself as sophisticated, intellectual and creative. An example of this production can be seen in the national television campaign and website developed by Positively Wellington Tourism (funded by Wellington businesses with support from Wellington City Council). The website terms Wellington the “capital of cool,” linking “cool” with the cultural elements of Wellington, telling browsers that the city is “home to Parliament, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa, a thriving film industry, and heaps of other cool stuff” (*WellingtonNZ.com*). The

website's television advert, with its moody violin-based electronic soundtrack and dissolving shot transitions narrates a weekend away for two, presenting Wellington as an edgy city laced with sex, coffee, art and jazz.

This emphasis on Wellington as “cool” is also evident in discourse about the city by its inhabitants. The city makes much of the fact that Wellingtonian film director Peter Jackson is based there and consequently Hollywood stars often migrate from the centre of ‘global’ film production to the periphery, populating Wellington as they take part in Jackson's films.[1] Unlike the New Zealand government, Wellingtonians are welcoming of these actors but do not gush over them. There is a sense of pride in “staying cool” and treating celebrities like everyone else. A myth oft repeated in the halls of the hospitality industry is typical of this attitude. The story tells of how an exclusive and hard-to-find bar turned away Liv Tyler when she was filming the *Lord of the Rings* because she did not have the correct identification to prove that she was of the legal drinking age (18 years old). Such behaviour belies a desire to not buy into the hype associated with Hollywood's commercialism. This is exhibited by Peter Jackson himself, who regularly dresses-down for red carpet events, thumbing his nose at Hollywood glamour.

Wellingtonians position the city as privileging “arts and culture” rather than the commercial. Although the multinational chains Starbucks and Blockbuster make appearances here, Wellingtonians prefer to get coffee from

a boutique fair-trade roaster and their DVDs from an independent retailer. Resting on its theatres, cafes, libraries, bars, and large design and music academic institutions, Wellington sets itself apart from both Auckland, the other major city in the North Island, and against the small provincial towns of New Zealand which are based primarily around agriculture, viticulture, or forestry. The commercial Auckland, the agricultural provinces, and Hollywood, are the Others against which Wellington constructs its identity.

This construction of Wellington as the “cultured” city in comparison to the commercial and provincial Other was apparent in the discourse of students at the city's namesake high school, its only non-uniformed and co-educational secondary school. I interviewed five focus groups of students, each made up of a pre-existing friendship group.[2] Three of the focus groups were single-sex (two female, one male), and two of the groups were mixed-sex. The participants, 24 in total, were students from year 10 to year 13 (aged 14 to 17), with varying class, racial, and sexual identities. I met with each group three times, except for Group Two, whom I met with four times as, due to their long enthusiastic responses and debates, they took longer to discuss each topic than the other groups. The focus group discussions were designed to facilitate talk about identity: how the students see themselves, think others see them, and the techniques (with particular attention to dress practices) they enact to shape their own and others' views of themselves. Focus groups demonstrate what cultural theorists Deborah Epstein and Richard

Johnson (100-1) term the “situatedness” of identity production, that is, its constant production through practice and discourse, which is influenced by the spatial-temporal location of the subject and whom she is interacting with. Focus groups, then, allowed me an opportunity to engage with the identity production of young Wellingtonians at close range.

The students situated Auckland as the home of commerce, oppositional to Wellington’s position as the home of art and government. Students spoke of visiting Auckland and small provincial towns and feeling “out of place,” too different from the inhabitants in their age group. The students understood Wellington to be a place of heterogeneity where difference is valued. Their visions of Auckland and of New Zealand’s provinces position these “other” places as sites of homogeneity where inhabitants are required to dress in a manner that reflects the commercialised trends available on high street since difference is not welcomed. The students have a sense of pride based on dressing outside of trends and relate this to being from Wellington, a city they formulate as fostering diversity. Yet, many Wellingtonians do shop at high street stores and thus arguably wear trend-based items. The students demonstrate, then, the familiar notion that “[w]hat is disowned, feared, and denied in the self is projected onto another being or group. The other is then stigmatized and warred against” (Caputi 14). The uptake of styles offered by chain stores is not included in dominant discourse on Wellington as such behaviour must be misrecognised

in order for Wellington’s identity position as ‘nurturing difference’ to be securely produced.

The contradictions that pervade the city mean that Wellington needs to constantly reassure itself of its cosmopolitan status. While most of its inhabitants may foster a nonchalant attitude to stars, many Wellington-based producers make it known when Hollywood’s stars like their product. Much is made, for instance, of Liv Tyler’s love for the products of boutique facialist and skincare guru Margaret Hema (“Press”), and the boutique clothing stores and cafes that Miranda Kerr and Orlando Bloom frequent (“Orlando Bloom Winter Shopping in Welly”). Several restaurants also have photos on their walls of *Lord of the Rings* stars enjoying the food at the establishment. Further, when Wellington was named the “coolest little capital in the world” by *Lonely Planet* in late 2010, the accolade was splashed across multiple city newspapers as front-page news (Stewart; “Lonely Planet Acclaim”; “Travel Guide Extols”). It seems that this little city is reliant on big voices to affirm its image as a worldly city.

This centre-directed perspective fosters what I term a “culture of critique” in Wellington, whereby Wellingtonians judge restaurants, politicians, cafes, art, transport and fashion in line with an imagined (wealthy, Western) city standard. This critique helps Wellingtonians justify their city as the best in New Zealand, indeed, as the “best little capital” (“Lonely Planet Acclaim”). This critique is influenced by several

factors: that the national Parliament sits in Wellington; that Wellington has the highest proportion of inhabitants with a post-secondary school qualification of any city in New Zealand (33% of Wellington's inhabitants have a Bachelors degree) ("Facts and Figures"); and that the city has more cafes and restaurants per capita than New York City (Restaurant Association of New Zealand). These factors help to produce Wellingtonians as discerning foodies and politicians. They know their macchiato from their mochaccino, their roti from their naan; they know bills from Acts, and elected members of parliament from members on a party list seat. This culture of critique is reflected in and produced by the multiple free-to-access Wellington-based blogs and newspapers that provide information on proposed government and council policy changes and review Wellington's cafes, bars, restaurants, theatre, and art. It is also reflected in the fierce debates found throughout the city regarding the best cafes, and, importantly, the best coffee beans. The Ministry of Culture and Heritage website, *New Zealand History Online* asserts that one bad coffee will mean that a Wellingtonian will not return to that cafe, such is the value placed on good espresso in the city ("Wellington Cafe Culture"). This care regarding politics and what is imbibed, where, is one afforded by being middle class and educated. It also demonstrates the importance placed on the care of the self (Foucault 1988): on what one does, where one goes, one's relationship to politics and the law, and what one puts into one's body. Thus critique is related to the construction of the identity of the

person performing the critique, as well as to the 'ethics' (Foucault 1985) attached to place. To be a 'true' Wellingtonian is to be critical.

Wellington's well-cultivated reputation as the cultural capital draws people to the intellectual, artistic and culinary city, ensuring that its reputation is cemented by its inhabitants. Indeed, it was this discursive reputation that enticed me back to the city that birthed me. My alienation from the provincial culture of Hastings, a conservative town at the centre of New Zealand's fruit and wine industries, led me to move alone to Wellington when I was sixteen. The prestigious tertiary institutions in the city focused on design, art, and politics also act as drawing cards for people intent on practising critique. These institutions interpellate students into the dual subject positions of critical thinker and producer commonly occupied by the Wellingtonian, and ensure that there is a large amount of non-commercial student-produced art, fashion and music in Wellington, helping the city to be the "capital of cool."

Wellington Dress

This emphasis on critique, on politics, design, and art produces a dominant dress culture unlike that found in the provinces, or in Auckland or Christchurch. People wearing a mix of vintage and new, designer with high-street clothes in a dark palette fill the city's streets, cafes and offices. In line with the production of Wellington as 'not commercial,' the Wellington 'look' is not predominantly trend-driven. City dwellers often allude to fashionable styles rather than embrace

them in a homogenous manner. Many of the designers that are worn in Wellington are conceptual rather than trend-based, producing clothes that nurture the cerebral rather than simply mimic catwalk looks from Europe. Appearing somewhat original is important in Wellington. This is achieved predominantly through the mixing of second hand or vintage items with high-end or high-street items to create a look unique to the wearer. In part, this mix of old and new, designer and chain store, could be attributed to the small size of Wellington. Combining these elements lessens the chance that a person might be in the same place with someone who is dressed in the same outfit. In addition, the high use of public transport in Wellington—higher than any city in New Zealand (“Facts and Stats”)—means that inhabitants are often in close proximity with each other with time to evaluate each other’s style. This further drives the culture of differentiation.

This culture of differentiation is demonstrated by the young Wellingtonians I met with at the city’s main high school. The students overwhelmingly view being unique as positive. For most of the students, the more differentiated they can be from others, the better. The members of Group One, for example, describe how when they were younger very few of their peers dyed their hair, so when they dyed their hair, they “felt really cool!” This ‘coolness’ is based on being different from their peers. Group One laments how it is much harder to stand out today because most of their friends use hair dye. In Group Four, student Lance reports how he is

“safe” in Wellington if he wears the sports jersey associated with a rugby team in a province more than 300km away rather than the jersey for the Wellington team. This recourse to safety is reliant on this student’s desire to be different from others. Many of the students assert that they “don’t like blending in.” Student Neve, in Group Three, states that subjects want to be seen as individuals because “you want to be interesting and different than everyone else, you know?” To be different, then, is to be “interesting” and “cool,” and consequently to be a valuable subject. Or, in the words of Group One, to be different is to “win at life.” Thus, the very act of living is entwined with being different for the students.

Indeed, the students associate appearing differently from others with authentic identity, with living ‘true’ to the self. The students position identity as based on experiences, background, and emotions. They believe that no one has the same identity as anyone else and position dress as both reflecting and producing identity. For the students, then, because “*everyone* is completely different,” everyone will look different when they are dressing as themselves. Because of this, the students associate appearing “too similar” to others with inauthenticity. This fuels the young Wellingtonians’ desire to look different from others.

The students also link inauthenticity with the commercial, a notion that is also present in the discourse of older Wellingtonians. ‘Real’ coffee and food are not procured from Starbucks or McDonalds. The students conceive

of commercial culture as promoting homogeneity, and thus inauthenticity. The participants' negative view of the mainstream is a result of the high value they place on uniqueness. This view is present in the students' conception of mainstream media texts, which they criticize for not featuring a broad spectrum of appearances as desirable and presenting a homogenous ideal that most men and women will not achieve. They argue that in the process of trying to achieve this ideal, subjects become similar and thus their selves and their self-expressions become less authentic. The students position themselves as critical of the ideals of commercial culture. They view those that accept these ideals without question as 'duped' by the media, and as belonging in commercial Auckland rather than intellectual 'diverse' Wellington.

The students use many strategies to ensure that they look different from others. These techniques include the conscious embodiment of an unusual style—in black-oriented Wellington, the wearing of as much colour as possible, or dressing more formally than other young adults, for instance; shopping at opportunity shops (thrift stores) or online auction sites where the clothes are second-hand; confronting friends who appear to 'copy' their style; constructing their own clothes and altering bought items; lying to others about where clothing items were purchased to prevent inquisitors from buying those items; buying clothing from shops outside of New Zealand or online from overseas-based websites; and attempting to avoid

shops frequented by young adults. Troubling the students' notion that difference occurs simply by "being yourself," these techniques illustrate that difference must be worked at to be achieved and maintained. These practices of "being yourself" involve choice and restriction; they are 'techniques of the self' (Foucault, *Use of Pleasure*, 10), which form and showcase the way the young person thinks of herself and her position in relation to the ethics of the city. The use of colour by the students is particularly pertinent in its resistance to the culture of dress of older Wellingtonians. This foregrounds resistance to norms as a technique of the self. In this way the students can be 'different' from the city's visual mode, and position themselves 'outside' of the adult-city. Yet through this colourful resistance the students continue to uphold the prevailing ethics of the city that construct Wellington as a site of creativity and anti-commercialism.

Due to their ability to produce difference, 'vintage' clothes are a large part of the Wellington look. Wearing vintage, that is, items made in an era other than the one they are worn in, is an easy way for an individual to appear individual. Given that vintage clothing is usually sold separately from the identical pieces manufactured at the same time, it is unlikely that the same two vintage items of clothing will be easy to purchase in Wellington. Vintage stores line one of the most popular shopping streets in the city, selling good quality wear sourced from New Zealand and overseas, usually at high

prices. These shops are so popular they have spawned shops along the same street that appear to sell vintage clothing, but on closer inspection sell clothes that only appear to be from the era they emulate, alluding in a hyperreal fashion to the style of the time. These ‘retro’ shops do not sell one-offs, however, and are thus not as well positioned to provide the buyer with a unique look.

As well as vintage shops, more accessible opportunity (thrift) shops line the edges of the city. These sell second-hand clothes and shoes, which have been donated by city-dwellers rather than curated with an eye for fashion by store buyers. Shopping at these stores allows the buyer to hunt for items that will help them to create unique outfits. Often these items will need some customisation. This operates in line with the mythological New Zealand trait of ‘ingenuity’ and the DIY (‘Do It Yourself’) culture fostered through early colonial settlement. DIY occurs both in the act of finding the clothes themselves amongst the out-of-shape, faded, poorly made and poorly cared for fast fashion of trends gone by, and in altering the clothes so they fit.

Arguably the propensity for vintage and second-hand clothing in Wellington is also related to the desire by some residents to not support sweatshop labour and poor environmental practices. The notion of ‘fair trade’ and of producers being paid a just price for their goods and labour is frequently referred to throughout the city. There are large adverts in the city’s free newspapers touting the fair trade status of goods; there are signs in a high proportion of the city’s cafes advising

the fair trade coffee within; and there is a popular shop that sells only fairly traded products. The popularity of fairly traded goods is related to the amount of discourse about the labour of majority-world workers that is available in the city, creating an environment where, for the liberal intellectual classes of Wellington’s CBD, to willingly not buy fair trade coffee (at least) is a moral crime. The penchant for second-hand clothes could also be related to environmental concerns as well as concern for the well being of the manufacturers of products. Wellington city fostered the highest percentage of urban support in New Zealand for the environmentalist Green Party in the 2011 election, with 27.7% of voters giving their ballot to the party, compared with 22.8% of voters in Auckland central and 16.3% in Christchurch (Ng). Buying clothing second-hand works to reduce the amount of clothing produced and thus the amount of environmental damage clothing production incurs, as well as ensuring that the companies profiting from the sweated labour production are not receiving—however small—money from the shopper’s wallet.

It is black, as well as vintage, that dominates Wellington’s fashion landscape. This dominance troubles the students’ strong assertions about difference and authenticity in the city. The connection of black with so many identity groups, outlined in the first section of this article, may help to explain why black does not seem to be subject to the scrutiny of uniqueness that other colours are held to. While in Wellington it may be important that (outside of wearing a uniform) a

person is not dressed in the same colours as someone close by, the wearing of black by many people in the same vicinity is acceptable as it can link multiple wearers to varied identity positions. Further driving this acceptability is the notion that black is universally flattering and stylish, suitable for everyone and for most situations. Black can be seen as—to use the words of Georg Simmel on fashion—“a social obedience, which at the same time is a form of individual differentiation” (297).

Further, black is the colour associated with New Zealand fashion. This connection was heralded by Maggie Alderson, fashion writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, who declared at Sydney Fashion Week in 1998 that New Zealand is “the new Belgium” and Zambesi, known for its dark palette, is “New Zealand’s answer to Dries van Noten” (Regnault 204). Continuing the comparison between Australian and New Zealand fashion, Marcus von Ackermann, fashion director for *Vogue Paris* stated, “New Zealanders have a darker outlook, less show-offy, more intellectual” (204). Ackermann’s assertion is oft repeated in the New Zealand media and by local designers. The association between New Zealand and darkness was cemented when Karen Walker, Zambesi, NomD, and World – dubbed the ‘New Zealand Four’ – showed for the first time at London Fashion Week in 1999. Karen Walker asserts of New Zealand film, paintings, fashion, and song writing, “there’s a heavy, ominous, slightly restrained kind of feel. And I think that comes from our culture and our landscape and just the personality of the country.

There’s a heaviness to it” (Regnault 207). Certainly, dress donned by Wellingtonians is often dark and intellectual, or, as *The Times*’ (London) fashion critic Lisa Armstrong terms New Zealand fashion, more Jean-Paul Sartre than Paris Hilton (12).

As Ackermann perceived, much of New Zealand fashion is not about cash-flashing, in-your-face flaunting of bodily or monetary assets. Standing out from the crowd is not something that is encouraged in New Zealand culture. This has an historical anchor in Aotearoa New Zealand, related both to the settlement goal of the New Zealand Company (the private organizer of English settlement of New Zealand) to create a country with an egalitarian ethos, one that was not divided by class; and to Māori culture’s emphasis on the communal rather than the individual. Indeed, there is an Antipodean habit of cutting successful people down, known as ‘Tall Poppy Syndrome.’ A ‘tall poppy’ is a “privileged or distinguished person” (“Tall Poppy”). The Roman tyrant Tarquin reputedly struck off the heads of poppies as a graphic demonstration of the way in which the “important” men of a captured city should be treated (*ibid.*). Tall Poppy Syndrome refers to a tendency to discredit or disparage people who have become rich, famous, or socially prominent, that is, those that stand out from the crowd. Black is a colour that lessens the ‘peacock effect,’ hiding tall poppies. As New Zealand designer James Dobson states, black “never overpowers” (Regnault 210). Due to black’s seeming universality, it is a ‘safe’ choice, allowing the wearer to be similar yet different to others in the milieu.

The relationship between black and New Zealand extends beyond the colonising New Zealand Company's drive for egalitarianism. Black also lies at the foundation of Western clothing in Aotearoa New Zealand. The first European settlers here were Christian missionaries, who wore black clerical dress (de Pont 10). Later, when the main wave of settler migration to New Zealand from England occurred during the 1860s, black was *de rigueur* throughout England and its colonies, reflecting Queen Victoria's mourning dress (11). Many Māori adapted Victorian dress in black. Additionally, for settlers, black's ability to hide dirt made it a useful colour to wear when working the land. It is no surprise that the uniform of the national rugby team in 1884 was fabricated in black (Palenski 110), institutionalising the connection of New Zealand and the colour.

Today, the dark palette of New Zealand fashion is mirrored in the bars and cafes of Wellington rather than muddy fields. Dark wood tables with deep black leather booths and dim lighting create the dens where Wellingtonians while away their time over copious 'long blacks' (double-espresso in a tulip cup with hot water added). If camouflage reflects the environment in which it is worn, then dark fabrics are the cloak of the Wellingtonian in her natural habitat. The dark palette is also cognisant with the oft-grey skies above the city, the deep green thick belt of trees that borders the CBD (known as the 'town belt'), and the chilling wind that continually accompanies the city. This is not a city

of hot sun, chilled cocktails, and bright colours that make tanned skin pop.

The prevalence of this 'camouflage' dress is propelled by the lack of international or big-box fast fashion retailers in Wellington. Many of the shops that dress Wellington are small boutiques offering small runs of locally made or designed clothes, or consignment shops selling the good, discarded clothes of Wellingtonians. There are no large international retailers in Wellington such as Topshop, H&M, or Zara. Further, there are no major global fashion labels available. There is no Louis Vuitton, no Gucci, no Versace, no Chanel or Christian Dior, for instance. The lack of international chain-stores or global designer clothing available to purchase may contribute to the muted colour palette of many city-dwellers who are likely to buy New Zealand (if not Wellington) designed clothing, which often utilizes dark fabrics and corresponds with the mild to dark weather. It may also go some way to explain why many Wellingtonians do not appear to wear trend-based dress—there is simply not the same amount available for purchase in Wellington as in Auckland and other major cities.

A final striking aspect of Wellington style is the lack of high heels worn in the city. This may be because many Wellingtonians use their feet as a main mode of transport—it is difficult to walk far or fast in high heels. Further, Wellington is filled with hills and the angle of high-heeled feet makes it difficult to walk up or downhill. Very few Wellingtonians change from heels into flats as they walk, bus, or train home, choosing instead to



Fig. 1a Alexandra Owen, LBD Capsule Collection



Fig. 1b Alexandra Owen, Autumn/Winter 2011

wear shoes that they can travel and work in comfortably. In addition, a significant portion of the workforce are university-educated women who are likely to have encountered discourse associating heels with patriarchal repression of women. It could be argued that the lack of heel is a sign of Wellington's liberal and intellectual culture that privileges women's participation in the public sphere and downplays the commercialism that the high heel is often associated with.

Dressing Wellington

The work of Wellington-based fashion designers Alexandra Owen, Deborah Sweeney, and Laurie Foon corresponds well with the ethos of Wellington. These designers create clothes that produce and reflect the city's dress culture, eschewing trends and fast fashion, concentrating on quality fabrics and construction.

Alexandra Owen designs immaculately cut and tailored, sophisticated pieces for women (see figures 1a and 1b). Owen's collections are predominantly monochromatic, although muted greys, mustards, maroons, and blues make appearances amidst the black and white. While born in Auckland, Owen was raised in Wellington and continues to live in the city. She completed her fashion design qualification at Massey University's Wellington School of Design. Earlier, Owen attended the same high school as the students featured in this article. Like the students, Owen positions herself outside of fads. Owen's website states that "[t]he house maintains a quiet disposition, rejecting hype and trends,





Fig. 3a Starfish Autumn/Winter 2013

allowing the work to resonate” (“Bio”). The site also emphasizes Owen as auteur, asserting that her collections “softly fuse together artistic vision and wearability” (*ibid.*). Owen’s pieces are often seen on high-profile arts patrons at gallery and theatre openings, and on the lawyers and policy writers of the city. Angela Crane, writing for *HerMagazine*, which focuses on women in business, states, “[i]n an industry that thrives on shock, change and disposability, Owen has made her name doing the opposite: taking her time, largely ignoring trends... She is essentially an anti-hipster; she’s not interested in distressed denim or seasonal prints but in sumptuous fabrics and heavenly shapes” (“Alexandra Owen”). Owen’s and Crane’s discursive stress on quality design, and ‘timeless’ rather than trend-based style, resonates with the spirit of Wellington as independent and art oriented.

Like Alexandra Owen, Deborah Sweeney gained her fashion diploma from the Wellington School of Design. After completing her diploma, Sweeney worked for Jill Stuart New York, Topshop and H&M. Perhaps because of this experience, Sweeney’s collections are the most colourful of the labels mentioned. Sweeney’s designs emulate vintage clothing, capitalising on Wellingtonians’ penchant for second-hand clothes. Her style is more youthful than Owen’s, yet Sweeney’s clothes still exude a level of gloominess befitting Wellington’s oft-grey skies. Sweeney’s recent collection, entitled ‘Lost Love’ (A/W 2013, see Figure 2b), is filled with loose-fitting garments, in high quality silks and cottons in black, grey, dusty yellow and orange. Showy

bodycon is not in Sweeney's design vocabulary. Sweeney's designs have been described as "intelligent, edgy and wearable" ("Deborah Sweeney"), and "dark as well as playful" (Williams). The design aesthetic of Sweeney adds some pop to Wellington's darkness, but does not send it into a fizz, which ensures that her clothes still represent Wellington, albeit a city sprinkled with sugar.

Working hard to ensure her materials are environmentally friendly and ethically produced, Starfish designer Laurie Foon encapsulates the culture of critique of Wellington. Foon's designs are produced in Wellington from fairly traded fabric, and use natural dyes and organic material. Foon's shop also stocks fairly traded 'ethical' international labels. Foon caters to the many Wellingtonians who are concerned with how and where their clothes are produced and the conditions within which the clothes are made in. Indeed, Starfish's tagline is "style with an ethical heart". Foon asserts that her company's mission is "to prove we can look great while having a minimal impact on our environment" (Blithe). Foon adds that "[f]ast or throwaway fashion is possibly the biggest problem we have and it's escalating" (*ibid.*). Like Owen and Sweeney, Foon also places emphasis on her materials rather than trends. Foon is termed an "idealist and a socialist" by New Zealand fashion journalist Stacy Gregg in her book *Undressed* (103). Indeed, Foon increased her Wellington profile fighting against the (now completed) city 'bypass' motorway, raising funds and awareness of the motorway's impact on the historical artists' and



Fig. 3b Starfish Autumn/Winter 2013

workers' quarter in the inner city. Foon had people who lived and worked on the proposed motorway route model her fashion range in posters which detailed how the motorway would affect them and the city (106). Foon has also been involved in other charitable projects such as Project Crimson, a trust that works to revive the native pohutukawa and rata trees, and has worked to provide support for those affected by the devastating Christchurch earthquake of 2011.

Foon's heart-filled passion for people and the environment does not result in her clothes being sweet and light. Catering to her Wellington clientele, Foon's initial desire to "get Wellingtonians out of their black clothes" has not been particularly successful (107). Foon admits that Wellingtonians like "hints of colour but never too much" (107). Indeed, walking into Foon's shop Starfish recently, the palette remains overwhelmingly dark, evoking Wellington taste on the recycled timber racks (see figures 3a and 3b).

Zippered Up: Parting Words

The shock of Wellington style when I arrived back in the city at the close of the 1990s will leave its impress on my mind forever. An outsider wanting to embrace and be embraced by the city, I started my new life by buying new clothes. I hoped that a black wet-look vest and white knee-length skirt with converse sneakers would not scream my provincial origins to my peers. Wellington was my Greenwich Village of the 1910s, drawing me in and showering me in a deluge of philosophy, music, fashion, literature and food. In many ways, Wellington is similar to other

small cities in the colonised West. Yet, it is my city, the city where my dreams were cemented, where difference is valued, dark is the palette, and wearing the past or fair trade is the way forward. It is a city that wears its brain on its (black) sleeves.

Endnotes

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[1] Emerging with a film that, although filmed at the edge of the world, continues Hollywood's cultural dominance.

[2] I defined 'friendship group' as friends that spend time with each other outside of the spatial-temporal confines of the school day, as well as at school.

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Image Notes

Fig. 1a Owen, Alexandra. Little Black Dress Capsule Collection. <http://alexandraowen.com/lbd-capsule-collection/>. Web. January 8, 2013

Fig. 1b Owen, Alexandra. Autumn-Winter 2011. <http://alexandraowen.com/autumn-winter-2011/>. Web. January 8, 2013.

Fig. 2a Sweeney, Deborah. Photo: Michael Ng, “Deborah Sweeney 1” for Air New Zealand Fashion Week. www.nzfashionweek.com. Web. April 2, 2014.

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Felicity Perry is author of a doctoral thesis examining the relationship between dress, identity and the media. It explored how students at an urban non-uniformed secondary school in Aotearoa/New Zealand use dress—and dress-related discourses—to both construct and express their identity. Perry’s continuing research is based on an interest in the relationship between media and the workings of everyday life, examining the ways in which gender, sexuality, race, class, and appearance intersect in social interactions. Perry is currently living in Tel Aviv, enjoying the opportunities for dress analysis available in this diverse city.

Felicity Perry est auteure d’une thèse de doctorat sur la relation entre l’habillement, l’identité, et les médias. Elle y a examiné comment les étudiants d’une école sans uniforme obligatoire en Aotearoa/Nouvelle Zélande utilisent l’habillement et les discours qui s’y attachent afin d’exprimer leur identité. Ses recherches s’enracinent dans un intérêt pour la relation entre les médias et les mécanismes de la vie quotidienne, notamment les façons dont les sexes, la sexualité, la race, les classes sociales et les apparences s’entremêlent dans les interactions sociales. Elle habite actuellement à Tel-Aviv, et y reste à l’affut des multiples occasions d’analyse de l’habillement social qui parsèment cette ville.