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Book Review: Clothing and Fashion in Southern History

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Off the **SHELF**

Clothing and Fashion in Southern History edited by Ted Ownby and Becca Walton (University Press of Mississippi, 2020: ISBN 9781496829511, paperback, \$30.00; ISBN 9781496829504, hardcover, \$99.00)

The scope of this 150-page work is sweeping, yet much more concentrated than its title, *Clothing and Fashion in Southern History*, implies. Broadly, six essays by various scholars study the history of the South through the lens of clothing—its production, distribution, and usage—though the essays in fact adopt quite a specific focus on the rich and largely unexplored clothing narratives of racial, gender, and sexual minorities, as well as the incarcerated. The book explores how their identities have been created for them and by them through clothing.

Essays are arranged roughly chronologically, beginning in the 1800s Cotton South, where enslaved people’s creative alterations to low-quality Lowell cloth represented a subtle reversal of power between enslaved people and enslavers. The burlap-like cloth was imposed upon enslaved bodies, as it was cheap and also reinforced the image of enslaved people as property, like any other goods stored in sacks. In conspicuously patching and mending such demeaning clothing, enslaved people found a way to restore aspects of their autonomy and identity. In the 1950s and 1960s, prisoners at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman would feel similarly toward their identical and evocative prison stripes. Prisoners, too, played a large role in the production and customization of their own mandated clothing and understood a culture in which image was a constant and valuable language.

Clothing production was then politicized during the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights Movement, bringing both Black and White women into more direct contact with the government while also confirming their

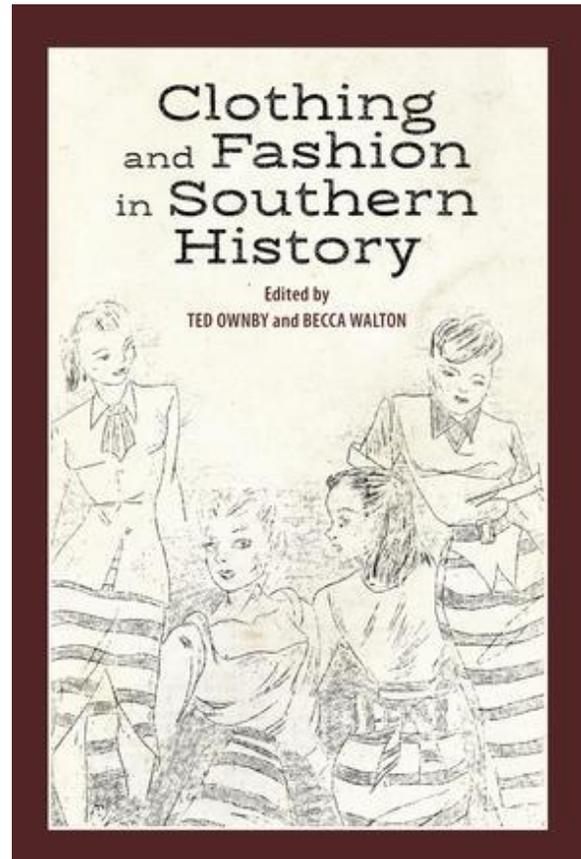


Image courtesy of the publisher

minority status. Confederate sewing societies of upper-class White women received government praise for their patriotic sacrifice, which often involved overseeing Black women who performed the work. Racial discrimination in the Works Progress Administration’s sewing projects also left Black women in the lurch. The Mississippi Poor People’s Corporation, though short-lived, was perhaps the first time in history that economic politics worked to aid Black and middle-class women, providing financial income and opportunity for activism through sewing and creative skills.

Grace Elizabeth Hale closes out the collection in 1970s Athens, Georgia, where thrift store clothing became a primary instrument for bohemian expression, mainly through drag, mismatching and layering, and androgynous dressing in the alternative music scene. In an area of the country still entrenched in convention, members of R.E.M., The B-52s, and Pylon crossing lines of sexuality and gender and creating new personas through dress was rebellious, a little dangerous, and loads of fun.

Clothing and Fashion in Southern History is an important initial thread in a new and needed area of regional study. This book is primarily recommended for academic libraries but would also be a strong addition to heritage collections of public libraries across the South.

Lindsay Josey is a collection development librarian at the Athens-Clarke County Library