

## Clothing as Resistance

Ever since people of African heritage were bought to the west through forced migration, they have sought to resist their oppression and degradation in many different ways. These would often take the form of uprisings where enslaved populations would seek to overthrow the plantation owners and overseers by burning the plantations down or damaging the crops. These uprisings were numerous and happened throughout the Caribbean and North America, the most famous and most successful of which was the Haitian Revolution where the enslaved populations of Haiti sought and succeeded in freeing themselves from French rule. However, what is less known are the subtle or quieter forms of resistance which happened daily and continue to happen in varying guises today as people of African heritage seek to be themselves and express their personhood as they see fit.

Resistance through clothing and dress is something that many people dismiss or label as ignorance, yet resistance to oppressive regimes through clothing is the most direct way for someone to assert their agency and self-expression. It is through dress that we determine first impressions and come to understand who a person is and what their mindset may be. This article will highlight a couple of these dress practices from history and in so doing demonstrate how and why they are significant within the global Black community.

## Hair

Head hair carries with it a political and social significance which has steadily developed over the centuries. To assume an identity of civility hair must be cultivated and groomed in some way. Historically to not cultivate one's hair and to purposely be ungroomed has suggested vagrancy, madness and even a lack of humanity.

During enslavement, the hair of the enslaved African although often covered with head ties or hats was also cultivated. Enslaved women maintained a sense of grooming by combing their hair with forks, plaiting and twisting their hair whilst men often kept hair shorn and short. The wrapping of hair with thread and twine (commonly known as threading) was a practice which had travelled with the enslaved from Africa and was adopted to prevent the hair from being reduced to unmanageable tangles.

However, prevailing attitudes of the White ruling classes entrenched the belief that African people were savages and less than human.

During this time the popularity of and favouritism shown by the White ruling classes to the enslaved who were mixed race developed a desire amongst many of the enslaved to emulate what they saw as desirable features, light skin and straight, wavy or soft curly hair. Therein the notion of 'good hair' was born; hair that has a closer resemblance to European

hair; not too curly not at all kinky but straight enough to be 'acceptable'. This along with a lighter skin colour helped afford the enslaved a form of cultural capital that ensured an elevated status that determined the basis for shadism and hair politics.

Subsequently, the implementation of the perception that attributes of Whiteness are the gauge of beauty and acceptability was established in the minds of the enslaved classes and consequently their descendants. It was not until the 1930s in Jamaica and the 1960s in the U.S. that Black people adopted a sense of racial pride and identification which did not emulate the White hegemonic beauty beliefs. Up until this point, Black people had sought to conform to the White hegemonic beauty standards by using various hair straightening methods.

The genealogy of Black people means that Black hair grows in a multitude of curl patterns and occasionally no curl pattern at all. Generally, however, Black hair tends to grow away from the scalp in a series of curls twists, bends and kinks that gently cling and curl together to provide an architectural mass of spirals. It is the structure of this architecture that enables the hair to be combed or "picked" upwards and outward with an afro comb into a rounded shape or "locked" together in rope-like strands which hang downwards to form dreadlocks. By creating such a presence with the hair, changing the silhouette, and increasing the dimensions of the head area the Afro brought with it a sense of majesty and dignity that natural hair had not done before. Meanwhile, dreadlocks, adopted by Rastafarians in Jamaica and later across the African Diaspora, came to symbolise authority and an alignment with the Nazarites and the Lion of Judah with which the movement had an association through the bible and Emperor Haile Selassie.

Thus, the Afro and dreadlocks established themselves as opposites to the straight styles made popular by the dominant White culture. These hairstyles were a radical departure from what had gone before in western culture and due to the links with the Black Power movement, the Black Panther Party, the Back to Africa movement and Rastafarian culture these hairstyles were considered non-conformist, separatist and divisive. An adoption of Black racial pride and natural identity was seen as a rejection of the White hegemonic beauty value system.

## Headwraps

During enslavement, the head wrap or head tie was worn to protect the hair from harsh elements; dust and lice or as reported in some cases to cover the hair so as not to offend the plantation owners or their families. Some plantations gave enslaved Africans an annual fabric allowance with which two outfits of clothing for the year could be made. Within this allowance was often included fabric for head ties, if not included then scraps of fabric were utilised for the same purpose providing, they covered the head adequately. The fabric which

was often a coarse osnaburg or rough cotton often had no particular style or pattern, compared to the fashions worn by higher-status women within the community caused the head wrap/ head tie to develop a lowly status and become associated with work and toil.

In the USA and in particular Louisiana the 'Tignon law' was passed which stated that a head tie had to be worn by Black and Creole women at all times to distinguish their status in society. A system of placage was in place which was a recognised extra-legal practice which enabled European men to enter into civil unions with African, Native American, and mixed-race women. The women were recognised as 'placees' but not legal wives and although the system commanded a lowly status that was subordinate to White women, the placees saw themselves as having a much higher status than any other woman of African heritage. Placees were generally of mixed heritage and therefore lighter skinned with less kinky hair than darker skinned enslaved women and were taken care of financially by the men to whom they were ensconced, so they adopted a higher sense of self-importance and worth and thus reinforced the concept of shadism/ colourism.

However, as they were essentially the mistresses of rich White men the ostentatious ways within which they would dress and decorate their hair was causing a problem for the White women and wives who felt the placees were too audacious and contemptuous. Therefore, a bill was passed that determined all women of African heritage (no matter how light their skin) were to cover their hair so the wider society could be certain of their status. This was an attempt by the White elite to prevent Black and mixed raced women from expressing themselves and exercising any autonomy or agency by forcing them to wear an item of clothing that had always been associated with some form of hard labour or servitude.

Nonetheless, that didn't stop the ostentatiousness of Black women. As the law demanded that their hair be covered when appearing in public many of them then sought out the most luxurious and brightly coloured fabrics, they could find to create their headwraps and adorned their headwraps with feathers, jewels and hats. The law which determined that Black and mixed women should be reduced by keeping their hair covered enabled these women to develop a new type of fashion that spread throughout the Americas.

In the Caribbean, many free women of colour and high-status women including European women had adopted the headwrap and hat style to demonstrate their high status in society. Black women's subtle resistance through accessorising and styling of expected and projected social subjugation had caused the association of the headwrap to become reversed. Similarly, in South America, bright highly patterned fabrics enabled enslaved women to develop head wrapping styles to rival and surpass the most flamboyant bonnet styles and were often labelled as garish and hideous by the elite as a result.

As the style of the headwraps developed amongst women of colour in the 19th century and this style started to be co-opted and appropriated by women in the elite class, there grew an understanding that certain styles of headwrap denoted your social status and wealth.

Although these styles may have been inappropriate or cumbersome not just for getting ready when putting an outfit together but also for the environmental conditions, it needs to be understood that the ability to have access to yards and yards of fabric and accessories at that time demonstrated a person's wealth exponentially.

Today resistance through clothing and dress is often seen in the form of a slogan t-shirt which castigates a systemic problem, social belief, or non-conformity to an expected social dress practice. The headwrap has seen a resurgence over the past 5 years and has become very popular within the mainstream culture; it has come a long way since 19th century Louisiana! However, Black hair and Black skin remain political and controversial, and it seems the dominant White mainstream culture, although determined to use elements of Black subcultural style in their fashion and cultural demonstrations, is still unable to extend notions of professionalism and acceptability to the natural formation and being of the Black body.

## Bibliography

Biddle - Perry, G. & Cheung, S. (2008) *Hair; Styling, Culture and Fashion*

Cashmore, E.E. (1981). "After the Rastas". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

Davis - Sivasothy, A. (2011) *The Science of Black Hair*.

Eaton, F. F. (2014) *Hume, Hobbes and the Hood(ies) or Saggin' in the 1700s*

King, S. A. (2002). *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control*.

Meacham Gould, V. "A Chaos of Iniquity and Discord: Slave and Free Women of Color in the Spanish Ports of New Orleans, Mobile, and Pensacola." in Clinton, C. and Gillespie, M. (1997) *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South*

Mercer, K. (1987) *Black Hair/ Style Politics*.

Morrow, R. (1984) *400 Years without a Comb*.

Riss, A. (2006) *Race, Slavery, and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*.

White, S. & White, G. (1995) "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." *Journal of Southern History*.