

Dress for Success: The Role of Fashion in the Civil Rights Movement

In many instances, fashion has proven to be an effective tool for self-expression and political persuasion. We can find many such cases within popular African American styles throughout the civil rights movement. Fashion is an important lens through which to examine the movement's political objectives because presentation and dress played a salient role in projecting the identity of the black community. In short, African American fashion trends contributed to the political messaging of the civil rights movement in two major ways: it combatted racist stereotypes and visually asserted racial pride. In this essay, I will further discuss how these themes manifested in the struggle for civil rights in the 50s and 60s.

Before delving into the impact of dress in the fight for civil rights, we must first understand the role of fashion in the decades leading up to the peak of the movement. Throughout African American history, the self-expression and presentation of black bodies have been constricted. As noted by experts on African-American expressive culture, Shane White and Graham White, enslaved people throughout the American colonies were clothed by their owners, usually in a few items of drab European garb that “sharply constricted opportunities for culturally distinctive aesthetic display” (4). Further, the authors claim that clothing was also a vital part of the system of punishment and rewards that kept the institution of slavery running smoothly (White and White 14). Clothing intersects both functionality and expression, so as a reward, clothing could grant slaves a shred of individuality and differentiation. On the contrary, as a punishment, clothing (or lack thereof) could inhibit warmth or comfort.

In the North, free blacks were expected to dress with simplicity to avoid looking like “foolish objects of shame” (Mhoon 26). Well-dressed black people, particularly in groups,

became targets of violence and harassment. Furthermore, the end of slavery put increased pressure on black Americans to present themselves respectably to white eyes. Proper dress “was an essential weapon in the fight against Jim Crow laws, traditions, customs, and practices” because it combatted “negative stereotypes about African Americans as unclean, unruly, and undeserving of respectable treatment” (Mhoon 27).

In the post-emancipation South, dressing in Sunday’s best was also a way for black churchgoers to assert their worth and “reject evaluations of themselves by white society” (White and White 179). Black churches often served as spaces of solace from white control. Hence, the churches’ teachings of nonviolence, civic order, and carrying oneself with dignity heavily influenced the dress strategies of activists who were fighting for their rights, even decades later.

This emphasis on proper presentation, combined with the racial segregation enforced by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case, led to the maintenance of “lucrative community-based apparel, accessory and hair care businesses” and consequently, the development of distinct aesthetics within these black communities (Mhoon 26). This style continued to evolve and took center stage during the height of the civil rights movement as African Americans reclaimed their heritage and expressed pride in their black identity.

However, I would be remiss to ignore class distinctions. Despite the growth of a black middle class in America, black labor continued to be exploited through the system of sharecropping, well into the 1940s. These tenant farmers were often indebted due to high interest rates, unpredictable harvests, and laws favoring landowners (“Sharecropping”). The clothing of black sharecroppers was highly utilitarian— like denim overalls, which were easy to clean,

durable against wear and tear, had multiple pockets for tool storage, and “offered free range of movement” (Ford 639).

By the turn of the twentieth century, there were already many reformers organized against the oppression of black people in the United States. However, many historians note that the broad civil rights movement began with the landmark 1954 ruling against racial segregation in schools in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (Patterson). From that point onwards, many large-scale political acts ensued, including the well-known Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and the Woolworth lunch counter sit-ins beginning in 1960. Direct action tactics led to the formation of new organizations, including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960.

I will now delve into the role of fashion during this period, specifically as it relates to political strategy. In the 50s and early 60s, many activists incorporated proper dress into their protest tactics. A lot of early civil rights activism started in black churches, where leaders encouraged their communities to dress nicely and conservatively. As civil rights organizer and minister Vera Swann noted, “For a meeting with an organization or face-to-face with whites, we dressed. It was an attempt to show you were serious and wanted to be taken seriously” (Mhoon 27). This quote helps to convey how the black community deliberately aimed to challenge racist stereotypes through proper dress.

As a prime example, we can look to a well-known civil rights figure, Rosa Parks. She was an active member of the St. Paul Methodist Church and the local chapter of the NAACP in Montgomery, Alabama (Houck and Dixon 37). When she was famously arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus, she was wearing a tailored blazer, a white button-down shirt, and a

small flower tucked into her braided updo. Her outfit was prim and polished without being ostentatious or showy, entirely opposing the conventional image of a disrupter, radical, or criminal.

There are plenty of other examples of respectable dress within the broader movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. was always seen in a suit and tie. Ruby Bridges, the first African American to integrate into William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans in 1960, wore a collared dress, black Mary Janes, and a white cardigan on her first day of school. Dorothy Height, a tireless activist and organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, was known for her collection of church hats, “a vibrant and ladylike way to accessorize the professional business suits she wore when taking on lawmakers on Capitol Hill” (Carlos).

The polished appearances of civil rights activists—such as those listed above—resisted the racist ideas held against African Americans at the time and further suggested that peaceful diplomacy was an option. Notably, when well-dressed protestors faced brutality or violence, it begged the question: “What was so dangerous about these sport-jacketed men and pencil-skirt-wearing women that they should be repelled by the cannon blasts of fire hoses or the snarling bite of attack dogs?” (Givhan). This question further highlights how these images revealed the indignity that protestors faced, consequently shaming the public and government into action.

It is worth noting that although civil rights activists were protesting against a system that oppressed their people, they were also “working to become fully integrated into it” (Givhan). By pushing for legislative action, such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, these activists were attempting to change the system, rather than deconstruct it. Therefore, they aimed to sway public opinion. In dressing well, these activists worked to assuage white

resentment of change”(27 Mhoon). Their efforts to assimilate into white mainstream standards of presentation created that sense that blacks and whites were the same, so there was nothing to fear about social equality.

Nevertheless, not all activists approached their dress strategy the same way. To elaborate, I want to first point out the distinction between the civil rights struggle in the North and the South. Robin Givhan, a fashion critic for *The Washington Post*, puts it simply: “Southern blacks were negotiating for rights. Those in the North were fighting for power.” By extension, prim and proper styles were a reaction to the blatant racism faced by Southern blacks through (at the time) legal segregation. These fashions reduced the possibility of negative depictions that could potentially justify oppression and the withholding of equal rights.

Meanwhile, black people in the North were fighting a different, loosely disguised form of racism. As historian Jason Sokol argues, white Northerners claimed to hold liberal ideals of equality, but “there were enormous holes in between their professed ideals and their practices” (19). As such, black activists in the urban North were less concerned about dressing to assimilate into white society, and instead sought to expose “the gap between a white liberal yearning and a segregated reality” (Sokol 19). Therefore, Northern blacks more quickly adopted styles that asserted their racial pride.

On a national level, the 1960s also brought significant change to the political and social landscape surrounding the movement. In 1963, the KKK bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four and injuring at least fourteen others (“1963 Birmingham Church Bombing”). This destroyed the idea that churches were safe spaces. Further, in 1965, the Watts Riot erupted in South Central Los Angeles over the arrest of Marquette Frye, a

young black man. The riot, which was found to be a “result of the Watts community’s longstanding grievances and growing discontentment with high unemployment rates, substandard housing, and inadequate schools,” mobilized more than 14,000 California National Guard troops and took thirty-four lives in six days (“Watts Riots”). As a result of many tense and violent encounters, historian Paula Giddings asserts that by the mid-1960s, “the idealism that motivated the early years of the Civil Rights Movement faded” (Mhoon 28). Therefore, alongside the formation of the Black Power movement, younger generations of protestors emerged and challenged integrationist doctrines. As the activists behind the movement shifted to become more militant, nonconformist, and confrontational, their styles shifted, too. In this next section, I will describe how black Americans used fashion to lean away from assimilating into white society and move towards proudly expressing their black identity.

Here’s one example: denim became an effective uniform for the SNCC due to its practicality (it could better withstand the physical abuse of “attack dogs and high-pressure hoses”) as well as its connection to the black slaves and sharecroppers from a “not-too-distant past” who donned the same fabric (Komar). Denim symbolized the rejection of the idea that the black community had to “dress in a way their white peers deemed ‘acceptable’ to gain the rights that were theirs to begin with” (Komar). Less formal attire, denim included, also allowed protestors to show solidarity with the working class when building the movement in more rural areas. As Ira Stohlman explained about her civil rights work in Alabama, “We were talking to people in work clothes. We wanted to be in work clothes too” (28 Mhoon). From this, we can see that denim allowed activists to proudly assert their pride in their black identity, by calling back

the clothing of black slaves and sharecroppers from generations before. A working class symbol, denim was also a rejection of white standards of proper presentation.

In addition, as college students in the mid-sixties read nationalistic works from thinkers including W.E.B. Dubois and became inspired by the teachings of the Nation of Islam, they grew “disillusioned with a culture that said the only path to success was through assimilation into mainstream White society” (Byrd and Tharps 55). As you will see, this mindset led to the adoption of black fashion trends that expressed pride in African American heritage and identity.

Notably, the revolutionary phrase “Black is Beautiful” permeated mainstream American culture. In the 1960s, the label “Black” carried negative connotations. The community’s reclamation of this term was a significant step towards a collective pride in the African American identity. As explained by journalists Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, “The shift to calling oneself Black and being proud of it translated into a style that proudly hearkened back to Africa” (52). Black beauty was communicated through wearing traditional African styles and embracing one’s natural beauty, including the Afro hairstyle. This directly challenged cultural norms of the period, including the “wariness of appearing too conspicuously ‘African’” that led magazines—even those for black audiences—to feature “models with lighter, cafe au lait skin and straightened hair” (Laneri).

The Black is Beautiful movement picked up steam in the latter part of the 1960s, but the “Naturally ’62” fashion show in Harlem presaged many of the decade’s cultural shifts. In 1962, photographer and activist Kwame Brathwaite founded the Grandassa Models with his brother Elombe, “a group of nonprofessionals with unabashedly dark skin and natural, unprocessed,

curly hair” (Laneri). The name “Grandassa” was derived from “Grandassaland,” a term that the black nationalist Carlos Cooks had used in referencing Africa (Foggatt).

To launch the group, Grandassa held a fashion show titled “Naturally ’62,” featuring Afro-centric styles and natural hairdos. The show was a huge success— they even had to hold an encore performance directly afterward for all the people who couldn’t fit into the room for the first round (Laneri). As a result of the fashion show’s popularity and the massive volume of people eager to partake in this celebration of black beauty, the show was held annually, even attracting the occasional black celebrity.

The Black is Beautiful movement played out in other ways, as well. When black girls couldn’t enter the Miss America pageant, the black community held their own. In 1968, the Miss Black America Pageant crowned its first winner, Sandra Williams, a 19-year-old Philadelphian who wore a natural hairstyle, performed African dance, and “helped lead a student strike at Maryland State College” (“Miss Black America” 12). As printed in the notes of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, Williams stated, “with my title, I can show all the beautiful Black women how beautiful we really are, with our full thick lips and our large noses. We must say it over and over and over, WE ARE BEAUTIFUL, because for so long, none of us believed it” (“Miss Black America” 12). This quote conveys that this pageant was a celebration of a black appearance— opposing conventional white beauty standards of the time.

As you can see, the Miss Black America pageant and the “Naturally” fashion shows were a clear rejection of integrationist beliefs of assimilation. In parallel with the sociopolitical paradigm of the late 60s, the focus was no longer about playing nice to win over white America, but rather about finding collective power in a black American identity. By brushing off white

beauty standards, they were brushing off white opinions. In claiming “WE ARE BEAUTIFUL,” the black community was essentially declaring that they understood their worth. No longer would they play into the belief that they were somehow inferior or undeserving of the rights and advantages of other Americans.

This sense of inferiority stemmed in part from the harmful stereotypes that were spread about Africa, the ancestral homeland of black Americans. In Malcolm X’s words, the colonial powers always showed Africa “in a negative light: jungle savages, cannibals, nothing civilized.” Why then naturally it was so negative that it was negative to you and me, and you and I began to hate it. We didn’t want anybody telling us anything about Africa, much less calling us Africans. In hating Africa and in hating the Africans, we ended up hating ourselves, without even realizing it” (Pohlmann 168). Basically, Malcolm X argues that black Americans were taught to reject their African heritage. However, the Black is Beautiful movement encouraged them to embrace it wholly.

As I explained earlier, the reclaiming of African dress was a way of expressing pride. Moreover, it was also a way to “show solidarity with the African nations recently liberated from colonial rule” mainly because “American blacks saw a parallel between Africa’s struggle for independence and their own struggle for equal rights in the United States” (Nittle). There was a growth in the popularity of traditional African styles, such as dashikis and brightly colored caftans amongst both men and women. Kente, a woven Ghanaian cloth known for its multicolored patterns of bold, geometric shapes, was used more increasingly in clothing designs. By 1965, African heritage was “a fundamental part of African American protest expression,” with speakers at rallies donning an African aesthetic to “[reinforce] a new political

consciousness” (Mhoon 29). This demonstrates one of the ways in which black Americans used fashion to visually assert their racial pride.

However, there soon emerged a resistance to this renewed cultural expression. According to historian Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, the Black Panther Party opposed African attire, believing that spreading cultural nationalism wasn’t enough to generate systematic change— instead, it was “the act of people who were not seriously dedicated to the difficult struggle of liberation” (117). The Panthers also condemned the co-optation of African styles by big businesses (which were often white-owned), because this cultural appropriation of African fashion in order to make money was yet another way to exploit black people and impede on their “revolutionary struggle” (Ogbar 117). This helps to illustrate the complex way in which the messages that certain styles express can be diluted if co-opted by the masses. Essentially, when African fashions became popular in the mainstream, they lost their ability to represent a collective black pride. Thus, they also lost their power of dissent.

In response, the Black Panther Party donned a uniform that provided a renewed sense of revolutionary power. It represented pride in their “blackness”: an almost entirely black ensemble consisting of a black leather jacket, black pants, black shoes, black gloves, and a black beret (Ogbar 118). The uniform was intimidating, bold, and iconic, and quickly became a symbol for the liberation struggle. The beret, in particular, came to represent support for the Black Power Movement and the Panthers, even for non-members (Ogbar 118). The Panthers—donning berets over their Afros and an all-black militant uniform—boldly communicated to white society that “they were not to be trifled with” (Givhan). This uniform blatantly rejected any notion of assimilation.

To summarize, proper and conservative dress allowed black Americans to combat the racist stereotype that African Americans were unruly and unworthy of respect. This dignified presentation also challenged the conventional idea of what a protestor or disruptor should look like, conveying that diplomatic negotiations were possible. Further, the image of a black person dressed respectably being attacked or arrested was jarring. These images helped to sway public opinion and appeal for government action. In an effort to alleviate white resentment of social progress, wearing polished styles proved that the black community could successfully integrate into white society.

On the other hand, fashion and presentation were a significant source of positive self-expression and collective black empowerment, especially as the movement progressed into the 1960s. The Black is Beautiful movement encouraged the visual expression of pride in African heritage. Black Americans challenged integrationist doctrines of assimilation and rejected the notion that they had to dress according to white standards to deserve their inherent rights. This could be seen through the reclamation of traditional African styles like dashikis and Kente cloth, as well as through the adoption of protest uniforms like the denim uniforms of the SNCC and the head-to-toe black ensemble of the Black Panther Party. From broad-shouldered blazers to black berets, the trends in black fashion throughout the struggle for civil rights reveal the bigotry they were up against, and the freedoms they were fighting for.

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