

Writing #1: Clothing Factors of Women Activists

Leah K. Brainerd

Department of Design, Housing, and Merchandising, Oklahoma State University

DHM 3213: Heritage of Dress II

Professor Crystal Emerson

February 21, 2022

Clothing is a tool that can be utilized by anyone. It does not fall within the boundaries of social class, it can be as much or as little as is wanted, and it can mean anything and everything. Clothing can draw people together or divide them dramatically. It wields such great power yet is seen as mundane in the accessibility of it all. However, during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, clothing acted as a means to portray ideals as well as speak out against oppression and tell stories of the past. These stories from slavery and about oppression of an entire race formed activists and developed generations that were tired of oppression and saw the critical need for change in the world and in the ideals of the nation. These stories encouraged action and when protests started to take place, and other external factors became apparent, people expressed ideals not simply by speaking or writing about them but by wearing clothing that made a statement. Some of the external factors that influenced clothing choices of women activists were religion, slavery, consumer behavior, and politics.

Religion played a large role in the early clothing choices of women activists because African-Americans wanted to show that they were moral and intelligent as well as God-fearing and respectable citizens. They did this primarily in dressing in their Sunday best everyday so as to squash racism and sexism and show they had morals. “Leaders of the major civil rights organizations asserted that dressing ‘modestly, neatly . . . as if you were going to church’ was a crucial part of the route to freedom” (Ford, 2013, p. 629). Thus, women’s march and activism outfits consisted of “clothing that covered much of the body, like long skirts or dresses and long-sleeved blouses, in simple colors or prints” (Ford, 2013, p. 630). These clothes helped show the respectability of African-Americans as well as helped white people not see them as heathens but as worthy of respect in covering themselves to fit in with the white people. In addition to modest clothing, women also wore “gloves, hats, and post earrings” which “lent a sense of refinement

and sartorial elegance” to the wearers (Ford, 2013, p. 630). These accessories might seem small, but helped African-Americans to look like they had means to spend on nice clothing and accessories and deserved the rights that white people had inherently. Along with modest clothing and jewelry, “women’s hair was straightened and neatly pulled into buns or French twists” (Ford, 2013, p. 630). As black hair was seen as unkempt, unruly, and expensive, black women had to conform to the white beauty standards of straight hair and tight buns to be seen as clean and appealing to white audiences. These tidy and clean outfits were the uniform of original women activists who portrayed themselves as respectable humans, as they were, in hopes of being seen as worthy of equal rights. However, even dressed as well as they could be in hopes of gaining respect, women activists were still degraded by “the brutality of police billy clubs, attack dogs, and water hoses” (Ford, 2013, p. 631). These attacks, and others where black women were assaulted - while “dressed in their finest, with their hair neatly coiffed - with food and drinks” showed that they could not go peacefully, that things were going to need to change for progress to happen (Ford, 2013, p. 633). As the Civil rights movement developed, younger activists were less inclined to dress in their Sunday best and show white people that they were simply ‘good people’ that deserve equal rights. They saw that it was “not reasonable to have on skirts and pumps” (Ford, 2013, p. 636). Activists started to fight against the oppression instead of simply taking the hits, and they showed their ideals and reclaimed their past through the clothing they wore.

To take back what was forced upon enslaved African-Americans, activists flipped the script on what certain clothing and fabric meant to show that they did not have to conform to white culture, but that they could have their own culture while hitting back at Eurocentric ideals. Clad in denim overalls, they wanted to show they were not afraid of their ancestors, but

embraced their heritage in how they dressed as slaves, because “in the United States, slave owners in the 19th century clothed enslaved field workers in [the] hardy fabric” (Tensley, 2020, p.1). For historical context, this hardy fabric came from consumer behavior in the 1800s because “in the early nineteenth century, slave owners bought raw denim ... in bulk to clothe their [slaves]” (Ford 2013, p. 638). Denim became popular because it was readily available and was tough, so slave owners purchased denim because it was on-hand and would last slaves a long time so that no new clothes had to be made for them. During the civil rights movement, not only did activists wear jeans to show that they were not ashamed of where they came from but they also “donned jeans and overalls to show that racial caste and black poverty were problems worth addressing” (Tensley, 2020, p.1). Younger activists went against older leaders in their suits and respectable clothing to show that they were going to “[celebrate] the clothing of African American sharecroppers” (Ford, 2013, p. 626). This denim ‘uniform’ became so popular that it became known as “SNCC skin” (Ford, 2013, p. 639). Both men and women donned this unsaid ‘uniform’ because “women aimed to desexualize their bodies, not only to protect themselves from sexual assault, but also to blur prescribed gender roles and notions of feminine propriety” (Ford, 2013, p. 627). They also wanted to blur the lines in terms of “espousing the clothing of the laboring class” (Ford, 2013, p. 627). Denim became “a cultural and political tool deployed to create community and to represent SNCC's vision for a new American democracy” (Ford, 2013, p. 627). Denim has a long history, yet this same fabric that was called “negro clothes” and divided people, now united an entire movement in claiming denim for themselves for good instead of letting the bad connotations behind it define them (Ford, 2013, p. 638). Activists worked denim for their own gain and helped usher in a new generation and era where they decided for themselves and pushed back against the stereotypes and reclaimed their clothes and

heritage as their own. This same denim that came from the gold rush and formed work clothes for generations of slaves now became a cry for justice in a society so lost in the oppression and racism of other human beings.

Another majorly important tool to show that the end of oppression was coming was the way African-American women started to wear their hair naturally. Along with the civil rights movement came “an increased awareness of being black” (Cole 52). This awareness led to more pride in how black women held themselves and in how they fought for what they believed in and knew they deserved. It led to confidence and pride in where they came from and in looking to their ancestral roots. In addition to the confidence that natural hair gave them, it also stereotyped them as too loud, or too black, or too much of themselves. Black women were shamed for not conforming to traditional euro-centric ideals of beauty. However, with the pride in themselves that it took to start an anti-racism and civil rights movement, African-Americans started showing that they were not afraid to show that “black is beautiful” (Callahan, 2020). This theme of ‘black is beautiful’ started to flourish in the 1960s because of the distinct awareness of the difference in skin color that the civil rights movement created. African-Americans stopped seeing themselves as a worse other and started to see that other is not better or worse, and it was not even really other, it was a social construct, so if no one else wants to recognize the dignity and beauty of blacks, they would do it themselves. Women of the era started to have shirts with the slogan ‘black is beautiful’ to show their confidence and self-love as the civil rights movement made them so apparent to the fact that they looked different than white people, and they started showing people that it is good to be different sometimes. In addition to using the slogan ‘black is beautiful’ as a tool for self-expression, hair became a great tool as well to not only show differences, but to embrace differences. Hair has always been used as a tool for self-expression,

and slave owners used this to their advantage to discipline slaves by shaving women's heads as a power play (Callahan, 2020). However, now that African-American women are in-charge of themselves, they chose to wear their hair natural to tell the world that it is theirs, it cannot be taken away, and it is not something that is to be ashamed of. Women also made hair a political statement in how they used their natural hair to say that they will not be oppressed anymore, and that they were not afraid to be themselves. They were stating that they deserve equal rights, and they would not conform to gain them. These women were unapologetically real with the world and would not take no for an answer in what they deserved.

Everyone in the world has one thing in common, they get up and they put on clothing every morning (Callahan, 2018). This fact may seem small, but it binds all people together, no matter how different or far apart. Clothing can make people feel a certain way about themselves, it can help their self-esteem, or it can tear them down. Clothing has immense power, both for good and for evil. The clothing that women activists wore during the civil rights movement impacted how they saw themselves and how others viewed them and their morals, or lack thereof. Each clothing choice they made had stereotypes attached to them as well as ideals and values tacked on, whether intentional or not. Each of these outfits and hairstyles may seem mundane and unimportant, yet each told the world of the wearer's ideals and values and helped to portray an entire movement. Long skirts portrayed religion, denim portrayed taking back for themselves what was forced upon them during slavery as well as the consumer behavior of the times, and big hair portrayed confidence and fighting the stereotypes and politics of the era. The clothing of the movement had something to say, and if people did not want to listen, they only had to watch.

References

- Callahan, A. (Executive Producer). (2018-present). *Liberated threads: Black women, style, and the politics of Global soul with Dr. Tanisha C. Ford - dressed: The history of fashion* [Audio podcast]. iHeart. [https://www.iheart.com/podcast/105-dressed-the-history-of-fashion-29000690/episode/liberated-threads-black-women-style-and-72277266/](https://www.iheart.com/podcast/105-dressed-the-history-of-fashion/29000690/episode/liberated-threads-black-women-style-and-72277266/)
- Cole, J. B. (2014). Culture. *Black Scholar*, 44(3), 52–57.
<https://doi-org.argo.library.okstate.edu/10.1080/00064246.2014.11641241>
- Ford, T. C. (2013). SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress. *Journal of Southern History*, 79(3), 625–658.
- Tensley, B. (2020, 12). Every Wear. *Smithsonian*, 51, 9-11.
<http://argo.library.okstate.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/every-wear/docview/2468684554/se-2?accountid=4117>