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SHA'MIRA COVINGTON

University of Georgia

KATALIN MEDVEDEV

University of Georgia

Dressing for freedom and justice

ABSTRACT

Clothing communicates our attitudes and positions in the world, particularly when a dress is used as a vehicle for protest. This article has two goals. First, it analyses the history of protest dress of Black American resistance movements. Second, it scrutinizes the public perception of these movements by reviewing white media images of Black bodies participating in the resistance. The media shapes our world as well as public perceptions. It is linked to social change, thus, investigating various media images allows us to explore the cultural systems in which we live and the complexity of different means of communication and human interactions. Two theoretical frameworks have driven the research process. Social semiotics was employed to explain meaning-making as a social process and critical race theory to investigate the ways in which racialized bodies are perceived in white media. The latter was chosen because of its usefulness for examining society's categorizations of race, law, power and culture. Through the lens of these two theoretical frameworks, it becomes evident that the dress of Black American protestors has historically communicated various discourses at the same time.

KEYWORDS

slave dress protest
dress social
semiotics critical
race theory
Civil Rights
Black Power
LA Riots
Black Lives Matter

Introduction

The dress is a visual statement of identity and culture, but people's personal sartorial choices also affect public perception. There has been ample empirical research on how sartorial choices influence people's attitudes about the wearer in various contexts. For example, Solomon and Scholper's (1982) study examined the strategic use of clothing in shaping self-concept. Through interviews, they concluded that clothing is a tool of self-definition and that there is tactical use for clothing as a social and symbolic product. Because certain types of clothing may evoke strong responses in others, we are careful and self-conscious about how we decorate ourselves. Additionally, the clothing that we wear affects the ways we are perceived as individuals, which makes sartorial choices vital in non-verbal communication. This is especially true in the case of protest dress. In protest dress, the wearer outwardly makes a statement about a political issue by dressing the body through both utilitarian and decorative means in ways that can be perceived as controversial. Perceptions are often formed based on images of protestors provided by news coverage and other media (Roessler 2007). This article seeks to analyse the history of protest dress within Black American resistance movements and scrutinize the public perception of these movements by reviewing contemporary media images of Black bodies in resistance. By drawing on a social semiotic theoretical framework, six images are referenced as examples of the type of media disseminated by various outlets. The images depict the times of slave escapes, the Reconstruction era, civil rights protests, the Black Power Movement, the LA Riots and Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations. By examining the images through the social semiotic theoretical framework and analysing public perceptions of the movements through a critical race theory (CRT) lens, we hope to raise questions about the public's assessment of Black protest, using the dress as our main analytical tool. Our goal is to provide a nuanced understanding of protest dress as a reflection of the Black experience in different time periods.

A social semiotic analysis of Black protest dress

The analytical framework of this study is social semiotics. Semiotics is the study of sign processes and systems in culture. It is an important aspect of understanding media, such as photography, film and advertisements (Nöth 1997). It is particularly useful for analysing signs as vehicles to propagate meaning. According to Saussure (2001), there are two main parts to any sign: the signifier, which connotes any material *thing*, and the signified, which is the meaning that is made of that *thing* by the receiver. Clothing is considered a critical semiotic resource because it is viewed as a sign that signifies a particular meaning (Owyong 2009). For example, a police uniform (sign) is a specific type of clothing that associates a person with law enforcement. The uniform is symbolic because it represents authority, law and power (signifier) based on social agreement and norms.

Clothing rarely operates in isolation as a semiotic resource; therefore, in social semiotics, the focus changes from the sign to the way people use semiotic resources to produce communicative artefacts and events as well as interpret them in the context of specific social situations and practices (Van Leeuwen 2005). Van Leeuwen's (2005) framework has been particularly useful for understanding protest dress; and, in this case, Black protest dress because it explains the way in which communicators or wearers use semiotic resources

– one of which is clothing – to achieve particular goals such as garnering support for their cause and/or changing perception. Social semiotics helps to understand the dissemination of media images as modes of communication that people use to represent their interpretation of the world and shape power

relations with others (Bezemer and Jewitt 2009). The sartorial choices of protestors have a meaning-making potential and enter into communication with preconceived, socially constructed ideas and values associated with them.

This study has also made use of Barthes's investigation of signifying units in clothing. Barthes and Stafford (2013) state that even if there is not any explicit meaning to clothing, the application of linguistic analysis attaches signifying meaning to it. In the case of media imagery, photos are often accompanied by a caption that gives context to the image that is depicted. The same is true for the images of Black bodies in resistance. The written description serves to inform viewers beyond what the image may outwardly depict.

For our analysis, we have used semantic descriptions of Black protest dress from the media to provide insights on the possible perceptions of the protestors by a white audience. We do not intend for this analysis to be exhaustive. Rather, our goal is to provide a general understanding of how Black protest dress, and, in turn, protest movements, has been historically perceived by white viewers. We want to contribute to a more informed analysis of the role race plays in the assessment of Black protest dress. We specify the difference between white¹ and Black viewers of the media images. This is necessary because, culturally, Black viewers will perceive and assess the depicted sartorial meanings differently than white viewers. Additionally, the perceptions of both parties have changed over time as social circumstances have shifted.

inequalities and support the idea of colour blindness that does not yet exist in society (Kapitan 2016).

A CRT lens

CRT emerged in legal studies as a response to the civil rights struggle and the liberal notion of colour blindness (López 2007). It was spearheaded by scholars like Alan Freeman (1977), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988) and Derrick Bell (1987), who recognized the slow progress around race relations after the Civil Rights Movement. CRT was induced by the frustration that the 'Second Reconstruction' (the Civil Rights Movement) had failed to eliminate racism (Crenshaw 1988). Crenshaw (2011) stated and that there was/is a 'misalignment within the context of particular institutional and discursive struggles over the scope of race and racism' (Crenshaw 2011: 1259), which brought to the forefront the fault in the normative commitment of 'racial equality' in law. This awareness of misalignment does not stop at mere philosophical critique but also includes activist engagement with the institutions of liberal reform. CRT theorists insist that the knowledge offered as 'rational' and 'objective' truth, privileges the voice of the white majority and is passed off as universal authority (Bell 1995). To combat such imbalance, CRT centres experiential scholarship with racial and other socially constructed hierarchies through the perspectives of the historically oppressed, commodified and marginalized (Bell 1987). Additionally, CRT recognizes interest convergence, known as the idea that perceived improvements in racial equity are only gained when they benefit the majority of white society (Bell 2004). In other words, racial inclusion is tolerated *only* when those improvements are not overhauling the *status quo* or when it is a societal need. Despite extensive scholarship on race, most researchers who operate under CRT posit that racism is hegemonic. They argue that racism and racial inequality are engrained in society, and racial hegemony is separate from individual beliefs (Bonilla-Silva 2019).

1. Following the lead of many historical Black and anti-racist writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Audre Lorde and Tema Okun, we chose to capitalize 'Black' when referring to Black people and lower case 'white' when referring to white groups. We are choosing to centre the leadership, authority and truths of the particular group of marginalized people to which the first author belongs. We believe that calls for equal treatment in the terms 'Black' and 'white' in writing only further whitewash

Although CRT has come out of and has been applied to the critical analysis of how America's racial history has shaped the law, its tenets are applicable across disciplines. Delgado and Stefancic's book, *Critical Race Theory* (2012), state that CRT operates under four assumptions: (1) racism is embedded in our institutions, therefore, it can appear normal in most day-to-day activities; (2) it commits to a 'revisionist history' and is concerned with replacing majoritarian interpretations with more accurate minority experiences; (3) it critiques liberalism and the idea of 'colour blindness' and (4) racism cannot be adequately addressed in our current system because it is a consequence of that system. Consequently, it needs to be completely overhauled for fundamental change to occur. Moreover, CRT scholarship draws attention to and addresses the concerns of individuals affected by racism through the examination of those who perpetrate and are seemingly unaffected by racial prejudice. Using the CRT framework researchers can begin to explore questions on how and in which ways the history of hegemonic racism has shaped societal institutions, the perception of Black protestors, including their dress and the political movements associated with them.

Appropriating a CRT lens, we are acknowledging that society, culture and, in this case, protest dress are scrutinized through historical categorizations of race, law and power. This approach will explore the persuasiveness of media messages and critically examine imagery that leads to stereotypical beliefs and behaviours against Black activists. The role of race becomes clear in the perception of Black activists when using the CRT lens, especially in comparison to other, traditionally non-Black political protests and protestors.

While there is research on Black protest dress such as Cheddie's (2010) *Troubling Subcultural Theories on Race, Gender, the Street and Resistance* and Ford's (2015) *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*, there has been a lack of comprehensive attention linking Black dress during iconic protests and demonstrations to the historical racial domination in which it occurs. From slavery to current times, the Black protest has, by and large, followed two traditions (Cone 1991). Integrationists, while fighting to claim their rights within a white society, attempt to assimilate and foster peaceful relationships with white society. Nationalists, on the other hand, reject the idea of assimilation and favour Black culture and militancy in the fight for liberation. The media, well aware of the differences in the integrationist and nationalist approaches, ascribes through imagery and discursive means certain perceptions to both protest dress and political movements.

Slave escapes

The slave rebellions took place during the colonial era to oppose the institution of slavery and as a means to escape the societal norm of brutality against Black people nineteenth century (Banks 1970). When slaves ran away, fugitive slave advertisements were disseminated to the white public in an effort to have the slave, conceived of as property, returned to its owner (Figure 1).

To provide a context for these occurrences, it is important to note that the colonial print culture and slavery were closely linked, and slave advertisements were one of the most prominent aspects of colonial news (Georgini 2017). Slave rebellions were dreaded in white politics (Paulus 2017) to the point of paranoia, even though insurrection was uncommon. Therefore, many fugitive advertisements mentioned that the escaped slaves may be in contact with each other and included a sense of urgency to retrieve them before they might gather. Others were plainly pejorative in nature.

for free labour. Slaves often used subtle methods or ordinary acts of resistance such as working more slowly, breaking tools and equipment or pretending to be sick. Others revolted in large numbers as in the case of the 1831 Nat Turner rebellion, during which a group of Virginian slaves killed 60 white people (Vaughn 2013). Despite this, substantial revolts and nationalist programmes were rare and slaves protested more widely in the form of escape. To be relieved of harsh treatment, heavy workload and the general toils of slavery, slaves would run away despite the risk of being recaptured and killed. Although there is no accurate documentation of how many slaves escaped successfully, it is estimated that 100,000 fled to freedom over the course of the

Slave advertisements were commonly commissioned by the slave's owner or the police chief. They provided relatively truthful and detailed descriptions of how slaves may have fashioned their bodies when they escaped. Slave owners usually distributed clothing to their slaves once or twice a year. These clothes were meagre and plain, made of utilitarian broadcloth, twill and homespun (Hunt-Hurst 1999). In Figure 1, the dresses taken or likely worn by the runaway slave, Emily, are described as a 'dark calico' and another 'blue and white'. Emily also had in her possession, 'a red corded gingham bonnet' and 'a white striped shawl'. Although not the most lavish of attire, the clothing seemed to have both colour and pattern, to some degree. While most of the clothing described in fugitive slave advertisements were plain and tattered (Hunt-Hurst 1999), the clothing Emily wore was of some novelty. The fact that Emily's clothing was described in such detail served not only as a means to identify her, but also to provide the public insight on how she specifically adorned her body. The ad also suggested that Emily was a criminal, that she was a 'runaway' and that 'she took with her [...] or stole specific articles of clothing.

The few material possessions that slaves may have had included some clothing. The only modicum of control they may have had over their bodies was how they dressed their bodies. As a semiotic resource, the clothing that runaway slaves took with them says a lot about the perception the slave was hoping to garner. Assuming that Emily had plain broadcloth clothes in her inadequate wardrobe, her choice to take patterned and coloured garments with her likely represents how she imagined herself as a free woman, outside of the confines of slavery. It might also signal that she hoped to avoid scrutiny by dressing above her 'status' as a slave. Perhaps she wanted to 'blend in' with free Black people by wearing higher quality clothing. Slavery was an exclusionary practice; therefore, while runaways sought to escape the institution, they may have also wanted to blend into white or free society through sartorial means for safety.

The Reconstruction era

The period after the American Civil War in the 1860s is known as the Reconstruction era. Early on, runaway slaves fled from their slave owners to join the Union Army during the war (Crane 2015). By 1862, thousands of slaves had found a safe haven by escaping to Union-occupied territories. Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, which declared 'that all persons held as slaves' within the southern rebel states 'are, and henceforward shall be free' (Emancipation Proclamation 1863). The proclamation also allowed for the recruitment and creation of Black military units within

**100 DOLLARS
REWARD!**

Ranaway from the subscriber on the 27th of July, my Black Woman, named

EMILY,

Seventeen years of age, well grown, black color, has a whining voice. She took with her one dark calico and one blue and white dress, a red corded gingham bonnet; a white striped shawl and slippers. I will pay the above reward if taken near the Ohio river on the Kentucky side, or THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS, if taken in the State of Ohio, and delivered to me near Lewisburg, Mason County, Ky. THO'S. H. WILLIAMS.

August 4, 1853.

Figure 1: Fugitive Slave ad, Ohiohistory.org, 1853. The Fugitive Slave Case. Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection, AL02768.

the Union Army (History 2009). After hundreds of years of slavery, however, white southerners would not accept the millions of slaves as equal citizens (Gates and McGhee 2019). Simply put, Reconstruction meant the reunification of the United States after the Civil War. However, it also triggered an ambush of additional white terror and violence against Black Americans, including lynching and the introduction of the Black codes, which would later turn into Jim Crow. During Reconstruction, former slaves, now free, fought for rights denied to them under the institution of slavery by holding positions of public leadership. More than 1500 Black officials, right out of slavery, were elected into the legislature (Gates and McGhee 2019). They sought to govern alongside white political leaders for the betterment of both groups. Adopting an integrationist mentality, Black leaders

struggled to ensure their community received equal rights in marriage, education and land within white policy. Their campaign was executed rather passively, and their protest was limited to the laws and policy of a white government. They were, however, able to establish Black schools, hospitals, churches and numerous flourishing businesses. During Reconstruction, the church became the institutional centre of the Black community (Gates and McGhee 2019), particularly because during slavery Black people were forced to worship in secret or with their slave owner's blessing. The creation of autonomous Black churches allowed for the display of the freedom of Black people through sartorial means; they rejected the clothing they were subjected to as slaves and dressed the part of a free citizen. It is important to note, however, that churches were segregated. This means that although Black worshippers mimicked the clothing of their former owners, they did so without the desire to be assimilated.

While Black Americans were able to construct a distinct identity in the way they combined their pieces of clothing into cohesive ensembles through the use of colour, pattern and accessories (White and White 1995), Black dress and fashion largely resembled white tastes during this time (Figure 2).

Style, during Reconstruction, seemed to have been a source of dignity for the newly free Black Americans. As apparent in Figure 2, the dress of those who were active in political engagement was refined and professional. Post-Civil War Victorian style fashion was popular among Black politicians, with differences in colour and fabric based on class, just like in white fashion (Grimble 2001). Seemingly, the media took pride in showcasing Black leaders and converting former slaves into 'civilized' men. This process is similar to the one employed in England, where dandyism was imposed on Black men in the emerging culture of conspicuous consumption (Miller 2009). The public image of former Black slaves was transformed to finely dressed public figures; their fashionable dress signified the transformation of Black slaves into respectable, refined citizens. Despite the racist backlash they continued to suffer, perhaps in an effort to appease white Americans interested in social progress or to legitimize the freedom of slaves to constituents, contemporary media images portray Black Americans as active citizens within white society. However, parallel to the great strides made in Black political engagement, minstrel shows were also gaining popularity. Minstrelsy was a form of entertainment for white viewers and depicted Black Americans as buffoonish and dim-witted (Saxton 1975). In minstrel shows, white men, dressed as Black caricatures, performed comic skits, sang and danced on stage (Hughes 2006). Despite the tremendous effort by Black Americans to integrate and present themselves as equal citizens, their campaign was mocked through minstrelsy and undermined by continued violence and unfair treatment (Gates and McGhee 2019).

Civil rights protests

Based on images available from the 1950s and early 1960s, Black protest dress was considered 'Sunday's best' (Figure 3). The murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy visiting his family in Mississippi awakened Americans to the extent of racism in the country. Till's body was brutally mutilated by a group of white men who were later acquitted. The body was dumped in a river and deemed unrecognizable by his family, except for a ring that he wore (Smith 2008). After Till's murder Black activists started to mobilize and protest in mass. The press took heed of this and followed up with countless images of



Figure 2: Five former slaves turned statesmen. Library of Congress, 1870. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-17564. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98501907/>.

Black bodies in marches, most notably, that of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. In his biography by Reddick (1959), Dr King's taste in fashion is described this way: '[i]n matters of dress, King is impeccable. Those who may have seen him on his lecture tours may notice that the shades of his suits, ties, shirts, and shoes blend harmoniously – and that he wears a handkerchief' (Reddick 1959: 3). This manner of 'put togetherness' seems to be common up until at least the early 1960s when young activists started to abandon 'respectable' outfits for denim (Ford 2013). This sense of 'propriety' in clothing was in some way due to the Black press' role 'in constructing representations of a church-based civil rights movement that was tied to Black middle-class respectability' (Ford 2015: 67). Additionally, there was an inherent tradition of wearing your best clothing in the Black community, which included religious, political and cultural meanings. A. B. Pinn, in *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thought and Life in Africa and the African Diaspora* (2009), examines the liberation of the Black body from colonization and slavery, which literally 'uglied' it through beatings, lynching and other torturous punishments.

Historically, starting during Reconstruction, the church had served as the place where Black worshippers could re-imagine life. In the church, Black people presented themselves in their best clothing and connected with divinity through gospel music. Wearing one's 'Sunday best' to marches not only liberated Black bodies from the ugliness of colonization and slavery, but also visually challenged the contemporary social and racial hierarchy. Church clothing thus signified a sense of beauty for Black wearers. Society had historically



Figure 3: Civil Rights March organized during the Civil Rights Movement. Library of Congress, 2018. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-03128. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003654393/>.

depicted Black people as unattractive, so ‘overdressing’ for church elucidated a standard of beauty not entirely informed by Eurocentric ideals. Therefore, the Black church was also a site for activism and a safe place to experiment with sartorial self-definition. Additionally, white society had been conditioned to view Black people as threatening (Hester and Gray 2018), which inspired Black churchgoers to dress as fine as possible to avoid negative white perceptions.

In Figure 3, both men and women are captured in protest, dressed in similar styles to their white counterparts. By this time, white standards of beauty were considered ‘normal’ and even desirable. Black Americans were encouraged and, arguably, forced to embrace white aesthetics in order to move ahead in society. The integrationist strategy, particularly in dress, may have driven how a Black protestor was perceived by white onlookers. The presentation was an important feature of civil rights protests. Figure 3 shows that a put together and polished appearance was common. For example, there is a man in the background of the image in a full suit. The women in the foreground are wellcoifed, dressed in pleated skirts, buttoned shirts and pearls – common signs of southern female respectability. Although the protestors are carrying signs ‘demanding’ equal rights, their attire is non-threatening; it suggests passivity and obedience. Although they are protesting, their bodies are disciplined. For the media, such smartly dressed protestors provided a change narrative to the poverty and inequality that Black Americans were facing.

2. Dashikis are loose, brightly coloured shirts or tunics,

originally from West Africa. They symbolize affirmation and a return to African roots and aesthetic.

Early on, Black resistance leaders realized that the white media was an important means of shifting public opinion (Nelson 2001). Therefore, demonstrations were frequently and purposefully advertised in the press, which encouraged more people to attend. During the Civil Rights Movement, protesters wore the refined and sophisticated garb of white society. Men wore starched white shirts with slim ties and dark suits, while women showed up in modest shift dresses. The protesters' sartorial choices meant to signify respectability and project success, despite one's skin colour. A journalist in

1963 from the Associated Press said this about the March on Washington: '[t]he reporters, used to crowds, tended to dress down for what would be a long hot day; the marchers tended to dress up for a special occasion, [as if it was] a holiday' (Associated Press 1963: 13).

Regardless of the middle-class, Christian, well-dressed appearance of the protesters, the language of the press coverage conveyed apprehension and fear. News articles often noted a 'concern that violence might flare from the protest' (Associated Press 1963: 13) even though such violence was unlikely to be initiated by the protestors themselves. Civil rights protestors were known to adopt a philosophy of non-violence. Despite this, the perception that the protest would incite violence was attributed to the protestors and not to those who opposed their cause and supported white supremacy and segregationist power structures (Equal Justice Initiative 2019).

Black Power Movement

It was during the Black Power Movement of the later 1960s that politics and dress were more apparently fused together with nationalist sentiments. The Black Panther Party (BPP), commonly associated with the Black Power Movement, was an organization that sought to tackle racism in police brutality, poverty and social and economic underachievement. The group adopted a distinct uniform (Figure 4) to signify corporeal linkage between Black body stylizations and political resistance (Cheddie 2010). As a signifier of political radicalism, contrary to their early civil rights predecessors, many female activists abandoned their 'respectable' clothing and adopted denim and work clothes to transgress a Black middle-class world-view that marginalized particular displays of Blackness (Ford 2015). Thus, the BPP uniform was an amalgamation of several other sartorial trends of the time; denim, berets, leather jackets and loafers, which were all worn by Black musicians (Cheddie 2010). When asked about the beret, in particular, a BPP member said, '[b]ecause they were just about used by every other struggler in the third world. They're sort of an international hat for the revolutionary' (Remnick 2010: 308).

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the beret was associated with Europe's poorest classes. It became a political

several military groups, likely because of its utilitarian and fashionable appeal, which the BPP embraced. During the Black Power Movement, the 'Black is Beautiful' campaign was also gaining traction as a means to dispel the superiority of Eurocentric beauty. The movement encouraged those of African descent to wear their hair in its natural state and display their afros (Matelski 2012). Pan-African styles also started to become popular including colourful dashikis² (Peniel 2003), braided hairstyles and large ostentatious jewellery reminiscent of African tribal adornment. Therefore, the uniform of the Black Power

Figure 4: BPP March 1968, Free Huey. Courtesy of Getty Images, 2673844.

Movement served as a rejection of the 'proper' civil rights aesthetics before it; it



statement in the 1800s when a Spanish leader wore it and the hat became a militarized accessory that was easy to mass manufacture (Lubitz 2016). It was later adopted by

was symbolic of a militant fight for Black liberation.

As Figure 4 depicts, Black Power protestors were typically represented in the media as members of the BPP, stylishly dressed, wearing an afro or beret and carrying the BPP flag. Rejecting a white aesthetic, Black Power protestors embraced the Black world-view, in colour, aesthetic and culture. Uniforms were all black, to evoke the associations of the colour with power, strength, authority, aggression and rebellion. The silhouettes were sleek, modern and sophisticated, to enhance the focus on the Black body. Kente³ cloth and gold jewellery, which represent status, were often worn to complement the black palette. All of these were a threat to white normative aesthetics.

Although music had already been used during the periods of slave escapes, the Reconstruction era and civil rights protests in the form of Negro spirituals and chants, it was religious in nature. During the Black Power Movement, secular music started to influence the styling of Black bodies in resistance.

Besides looking to the styles of Black musicians who used their voices for political messaging, protestors also used the song as part of their protest. For example, in 1968, James Brown's 'Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud' was a popular song during protests that praised Blackness as opposed to concealing it in a religious association. In fact, James Brown was strongly involved in social justice issues. He was an embodiment of the 'cool pose'. The 'cool pose' is a set of languages, mannerisms, gestures and movements that shows the dominant culture that you are strong and proud, despite your status in American society (Majors and Billson 1992).

The 'cool pose' includes flashy and provocative

3. Kente cloth is a West African fabric that was originally reserved for Asante royalty, but now represents ethnic pride in the Black diaspora.
4. The BPP's newspaper was called *The Black Panther* and was distributed both domestically and internationally. It focused on the BPP's ideology, international revolutions as inspiration and contemporary racial struggles of Black Americans (Nelson 2015).

clothes, subtleties in body movements; it is exclusive to Black groups. During the Black Power Movement, the 'cool pose' became quite common; however, it held negative connotations because the white press misinterpreted it.

The media regularly covered the Black Power Movement and BPP and commonly presented the protestors as militant and violent. At the same time, the BPP strongly courted publicity (Davies 2018) and often carefully organized publicity. The iconography of the Black Power Movement is radical chic, militant and violent, based on the military-style presentation of the group's leaders' discourse. The Black political aesthetic of natural afros, Black Power fists and dashikis were becoming more popular in the mainstream (Walker 2000) and conveyed political meaning to the public. The afro, for example, known as the most powerful symbol of Black Power style (Kelley 2015), became the international symbol of resistance, African beauty and liberation as it signified resistance to white society (Browne 2010). Although the BPP had its own internal newspaper⁴ that expressed the group's ideology and activities, mainstream coverage suggested both fascination and fear of the group. There was an overemphasis on Black men and women touting guns, painting the image of the Panthers as stylish vigilantes. They were portrayed as hip revolutionaries, and 'blackness' was presented as cool (Ford 2016). As described in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in 1970, 'the Black Panther Party, whose contentious style and provocative rhetoric has given it the leadership of the radical movement' (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* 1970: 87) highlighted the perception of the group as fashionable and cool, but also dangerous and radical, which is how it still is viewed today.

LA Riots

As the years progressed, Black music, fashion and history continued to inform each other. Through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, different forms of political outputs had crafted Black culture. Songs of religion, endurance and triumph continued in popularity within the public sphere and chants were often a common tool in the fight against oppression. While strides had been made in the fight for equality, iterations of racism and police brutality continued. In 1992, a video of Rodney King, brutality beaten by police officers was released to the public. The video was followed by protests and demands to have the officers charged in his beating. Following their acquittal, a series of civil disturbances took place that were labelled as the worst uprisings since the 1960s (Matheson and Baade 2004). News outlets reported on the destruction and unrest that ensued in Los Angeles. By this time the hip hop movement, which started in the 1970s in response to systemic racial inequalities, was widespread and musical artists were using rap, dance and other outlets to voice their political stance on the continued mistreatment of Black Americans. Even before the Rodney King incident, rappers were using hip hop to engage in political activism. A few years earlier, in 1988, rap group N.W.A. released 'Fuck tha Police' as a protest song against police brutality and racial profiling. hip hop culture in fashion and dress choices embraced Black style during this time (Figure 5).

Streetwear was the prominent mode of dress, not

only in Black communities, but the society at large as well. The casual style featured baggy denim jeans, branded baseball caps, graphic t-shirts and athletic sneakers. Because the Black Power Movement had positioned Black style as cool, hip hop culture and fashion had begun to cross racial lines and companies had begun



Figure 5: LA Riots, 1992. A group of people hold up signs advocating changes in the Los Angeles Police Department during civil unrest. Gary Leonard, Gary Leonard Collection, Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library, 00043454.

to commodify the subculture. Screenprint protest t-shirts, made popular in the fashion realm by fashion designers Katherine Hamnett and Vivienne Westwood (Mohdin 2018), were also heavily worn.

Figure 5 shows protestors after the Rodney King case. They are dressed in streetwear, t-shirts and denim jeans. There is both a white woman and man participating in the protest in this image, illustrating the strides that had been made in race relations. The woman appears to be wearing a nurse's uniform as if she is coming from work. A man is wearing a 'peace' sign t-shirt in the foreground suggesting the need for peaceful protests or peace. Another man, who is white, is wearing an American flag t-shirt perhaps as a statement of America as united. However, during this time, both retailers Tommy Hilfiger and Old Navy, had popular American flag t-shirts in the market and both brands were capitalizing on the hip hop aesthetic; therefore, it is hard to establish if the dress of the protestor is indeed political or not.

In the image, protestors are holding signs that convey anti-police sentiments. As Roach-Higgins et al. (1995) argue, hand-held objects should be considered part of the wearer's attire as they convey additional meanings. Resistance in the case of

the LA Riots was mostly acted out in the form of daily rioting. This suggests that the protesters may not have worn special protest dress, rather their ordinary clothes, after all, riots have not always been planned. It seems that dress during the LA riots primarily reflected the zeitgeist since hip hop strongly influenced the sartorial practices of Black communities at that time. Protestors wore popular streetwear in images captured during the disturbances and white news coverage focused mainly on the destruction, danger and violence created by Black protestors and community members. Despite this, their dress was also noted. Archival study shows that following the riots, an art show called 'Civil Disturbances' featured photography taken during the LA Riots by photojournalists, fashion and advertising photographers and fine art photographers (Los Angeles Times 1992) to draw attention to the stylization of protest. The hip hop subculture, which has its roots in Black and latino communities (Fielder 1999), was viewed as negative in public discourse because it threatened the 'moral fabric' of the nation (Lewis 2003). Although white Americans had begun to widely adopt Black fashion, the press and media coverage of the LA Riots furthered the dual narrative of cool and dangerous in Black style. The media's attempt to reinforce the need for social order while vilifying those who defied systemic forms of oppression and authority (Campbell et al. 2004) provides context for the perception of rioting as a nationalist form of Black resistance and thus, the negative perception of the LA Riots.

BLM movement

In 2012, an unarmed 17-year-old boy was killed by a neighbourhood watchman prompting another large Black resistance movement. Trayvon Martin was shot to death while wearing a hoodie and was described by his killer as a 'suspicious guy' because of his clothing (Francescani 2012). After the acquittal of his murderer in 2013, the BLM movement became visible during street protests. The movement is also actively engaged with social media. Participants are mostly millennials with lived experiences and world-views that are considerably different from their elders (Milkman 2017). With increased use of technology and the Internet, social media posts serve as a significant amplification tool for the movement and the imagery associated with it. With reference to some previous styles, such as the Black Power aesthetic and streetwear, BLM protesters are heavily influenced by the hip hop generation's aesthetic and stylistic choices (Richardson and Ragland 2018). Dress practices include protest t-shirts, dashikis, denim jeans, hoodies and on-trend footwear (Figure 6).

Although the use of hip hop streetwear may be, as Bourdieu (1984) argues, based on individual taste guided by habitus, and the selection of this particular style of dress can be considered exclusive to cultural identity based on its origination, it is also important in the performance of the BLM movement. Protests often happen in predominately white spaces where the Black body, clad in urban styles, is atypical. Their presence disrupts the white visual landscape, disrupts peace and confronts white silence (Richardson and Ragland 2018). As far as the participants' political leaning is concerned, the BLM campaign might be considered nationalist because it calls for resistance against assimilation. This includes resistance to wearing white dress styles on entering white spaces and neighbourhoods.

Figure 6 depicts a BLM demonstration, featuring protestors in branded t-shirts, tank tops and denim jeans. Several men are wearing snapback caps, which are essentially a baseball cap with an adjustable strap or 'snap' in the back. The snapback is a hip hop staple. It is typically embroidered with a sports team or city

logo. There is a woman in the image wearing a dashiki. This garment was introduced to the masses during the Black Power

Movement to symbolize African pride, but it is now almost exclusively associated with Black protest of unjust treatment. Afros, braids and dreadlocks are other common body stylizations seen at BLM demonstrations. Within the hip hop aesthetic there are strong and complex connections to sneaker culture,⁵ which is influenced by sports and music, and specific brands such as Nike and Adidas who profit off of Black ‘cool’ style. Because hip hop is now mainstream and seemingly commercial, the BLM movement’s style of protest dress crosses racial lines, but, not without trepidation. Hip hop style holds different meanings to its wearers and those who simply view it. In some ways, the style validates identity by challenging institutional power enforced by agents of the media, education, law enforcement and the prison–industrial complex. These entities label the culture as stylistically deviant (Baxter and Marina 2008) because it is associated with the music and lifestyle of a particular marginalized group. For example, hoodies, simply put, are hooded sweatshirts or jackets and are a popular choice in hip hop style. The hoodie is worn extensively during BLM demonstrations, particularly in cooler weather. It also serves as a visual reminder of Trayvon Martin’s death. The hoodie is a symbol that holds a complex meaning for the Black community not just because of Trayvon Martin, but its general associations with being a ‘misfit’ (Pham 2015). Its negative meaning has been reiterated time and time again, on the right-wing programme, *Fox and Friends* TV show. Commentators stated that ‘the hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin’s death as George Zimmerman was [...] you cannot rehabilitate the hoodie’ (NPR 2012) because it gives a sinister signal. Realizing these connections, the media harps on the sartorial choices of BLM protestors. Descriptions of coverage during protests include, ‘[a] man wears a Black Lives Matter hoodie as he stands on the lawn of Capitol Hill in Washington during a rally’ (*The Times-Tribune* 2016: D4). There has also been an increasing amount of coverage on the banning of slogan t-shirts from schools that bear BLM mottos (Arizona Republic 2016) such as ‘Hands up, don’t shoot’ and ‘I can’t breathe’, both last words of those killed by the police. Despite the coverage that focuses mainly on sartorial modes of communication, the majority of the public perception of the movement is negative (Easley 2017); it has no regard for the historical context of racism, protest and dress practices in American society.

Conclusion

Meaning-making and interpretation of particular sartorial choices by those outside the social, cultural and political milieu of the wearer influence perception, particularly when racialized bodies are involved (Lewis 2003). Styles of dress embody cultural cues that are easier to understand for those who are members of a given culture than for outsiders. This is apparent through the perceptions of Black resistance movements. The particular meaning-making potentials of dress choices in various Black political contexts offer a deeper understanding of the impacts of dress within and outside of Black resistance movements. The analysis of dress during the slave escapes, the Reconstruction era, civil rights protests, the Black Power Movement, the LA Riots and the BLM movement does not take place in a vacuum. Emphasis on the social context of each time period, typical contemporary media portrayals and evolving race relations influence how protest dress is interpreted and is involved in meaning-making. Although clothing offers a

particular meaning associated with it, the type of clothing adorning Black bodies imbues it with additional

5. Sneaker culture or sneakerhead culture refers to collecting sneakers as a hobby. Sneaker culture is strongly tied to hip hop culture from the 1980s when Run-DMC, a rap group, released a song called ‘My Adidas’ featuring the classic Adidas Superstar shoes (shell toes). Since then MC Hammer, Michael Jordan, Nelly, Jay-Z, Kanye West and other Black celebrities have sneakers associated with their style.



Figure 6: BLM March 2019. BLM alongside faith leaders and activists. Courtesy of Getty Images, 1161107658.

meaning and problematizes it. Protest dress on Black protestors communicates a number of meanings, simultaneously. The perception of integrationist versus nationalist sentiments is intertwined with individual and political sartorial meaning-making. When protestors conform to white aesthetics and stylizations, an integrationist ideology is attributed to the protest movement. Even though in the most recent movements, Black 'cool' has been adopted throughout society, the styles on Black bodies continue to be perceived as nationalist, if not dangerous.

Critically situating past Black protest dress and showing its evolution to the present allow for a broader understanding of how a semiotic resource, like a dress, has been used and will continue to inform meaning-making. Our analysis illustrates that the Black protest dress has always been a critique and response to the circumstances that constituted contemporary race relations and symbolized the social landscape of America. We felt it was necessary to embark on this research because Black dress studies in the political arena have been neglected, particularly, the stylized Black body as a site of resistance is missing. Our analysis situates Black dissent in a historical context and reveals the limits of racial domination through dress. Despite hegemonic racism, the significance of Black styles and the urge of self-fashioning have been an important feature of Black liberation. Although each analysis goes back to a specific historical time and the demands of each movement have changed over time, this study offers a uniquely Black reading of the sartorial images of Black resistance in the white media to gain a fuller understanding of the modes of dress associated with each protest movement.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Sha'Mira Covington is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Textiles, Merchandising and Interiors at the University of Georgia, USA. Her research emphasis is in Black fashion and cultural studies, focusing on the commodification of race and culture within the fashion-industrial complex and diversity issues in the media. She is interested in both a critical and postcolonial approach to fashion and media studies.

Contact: University of Georgia, 312A Dawson Hall, 305 Sanford Dr., Athens, GA 30602, USA.

E-mail: scovington@uga.edu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8581-8842>

Katalin Medvedev is a professor in the Department of Textiles, Merchandising and Interiors at the University of Georgia, USA. Her articles have been published in peer-reviewed journals, such as *Women's Studies Quarterly*; *Fashion Practice*; *Dress*; *International Journal of Fashion Studies*; *Clothing Cultures*; *Paideusis – Journal for Interdisciplinary and Cross Cultural Studies*; *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology, and Education*, *Fashion, Style and Popular Culture*, etc. as well as in numerous book chapters published by Berg, Fairchild, Pennsylvania University Press, Springer, Purdue University Press and University of Minnesota Press, among others. Her co-edited book titled *Fashion, Agency and Empowerment* was published by Bloomsbury in 2019.

Contact: University of Georgia, 319 Dawson Hall, Sanford Dr., Athens, GA 30602, USA.

E-mail: medvedev@uga.edu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1814-8233>

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