



Fashion Resistance and Black Liberation: 1970s and Today – Curating an Undergraduate Fashion Museum Exhibition

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From the 1970s to today, Black Americans have continued to fight for equity within white society through personal fashions, styles, and aesthetics. Members of the Black Panther Party and other activists developed and wore different styles representing Black. These activists contributed to soul style development by wearing berets, pins, patches, leather and dark colors liberation (Feron & Randone, 2020; Ford, 2015; Nelson, 2016; Young, 2020). Today, Black Americans who are part of The Black Lives Matter movement are also engaging in style narratives of resistance such as shirts with powerful statements. The Black Lives Matter movement is about conquering economic, racial, and social injustice in society (Black Lives Matter, n.d.; Cullors & bandele, 2018; Grants, 2016; Vargas, 2009). The purpose of our teaching paper is to explore how undergraduate students can engage with and learn about fashion history, in this case, Black liberation, through curating a mini fashion exhibition. We aim to demonstrate that this high-impact, hands-on learning activity is an effective way for undergraduate students to learn about fashion history and social justice through the study and mounting of physical objects (Green et al., 2019). We offer practical steps on how to engage in these student-curation processes. Our goal is to highlight how faculty can develop an approachable, one-semester, fashion-curation project into a course as a form of undergraduate curatorial exhibition scholarship. We hope our paper initiates dialogue about what an undergraduate-level submission for the newly formed curatorial exhibition scholarship at ITAA can be and look like.

Implementation Strategy

In a 400-level, seminar-style, fashion- history course focused on marginalized identities and social justice, students were instructed to curate a fashion exhibition in a singular case as a team. The students aimed to achieve the following student learning outcomes (SLO): SLO 1) analyze foundational concepts related to fashion, politics, and resistance movements focusing on the African diaspora in the United States; SLO 2) analyze the role of fashion, clothing, dress, and/or accessories for Black people and activism in the United States; and SLO 3) critique the social justice issues within the fashion system focusing on the African diaspora in the United States.

The project included 11 parts; the due dates were scaffolded through the semester. In part 1, they were required to develop their proposal including three different potential exhibition big ideas. For each “big idea” they had to identify objects from the department’s collection that could be included in the exhibition and a justification for each object (Serrell, 2015, p. 7). At this stage, the students were introduced to four curating ideas for object use: *existing objects in the collection* [objects already accessioned and ready for use from the collection that represent the time period exactly]; *borrowing* [borrowing objects from someone specifically for the exhibition]; *creative styling via proxy* [using objects in the collection to represent the time period, and they may not necessarily have been worn or used in the specific context of the

exhibition]; and *intentional purchasing* [purchasing objects for use in the exhibition and in the curriculum in the future]. In part 2, students refined their ideas and narrowed to a single topic and big idea. In this stage, they also identified which objects would most likely be used in the exhibition and/or if they would propose borrowing or purchasing any new objects to be included in the exhibition and then accessioned into the collection. In part 3, the students defined which objects would be included and began drafting the themes and interpretive labels. An “interpretive label” included the tombstone and the caption (or chat) (Serrell, 2015, p. 19). They drew upon primary and secondary sources to interpret the objects. They also followed a modified material culture analysis process focusing on object form, meaning, and use. In part 4, the labels and themes were revised. In parts 5 and 6, students drafted and revised the text layout, exhibition poster, and any additional media. In parts 7 and 8, the students drafted and revised the curator talk and slide show for the opening event. In part 9, the students installed the exhibition. In part 10, they presented the curator talk at an opening event. Part 11 they completed a reflection on what they learned.

The exhibition featured 8 objects in two looks; students wrote labels for each object (Figure 1). Their exhibition compared two time periods of Black fashion, the 1970s and today, by incorporating apparel and accessories that captures the ways individuals use fashion in resistance movement development. Some of the objects were existing in the collection, some were borrowed; and some were intentionally purchased for this project.

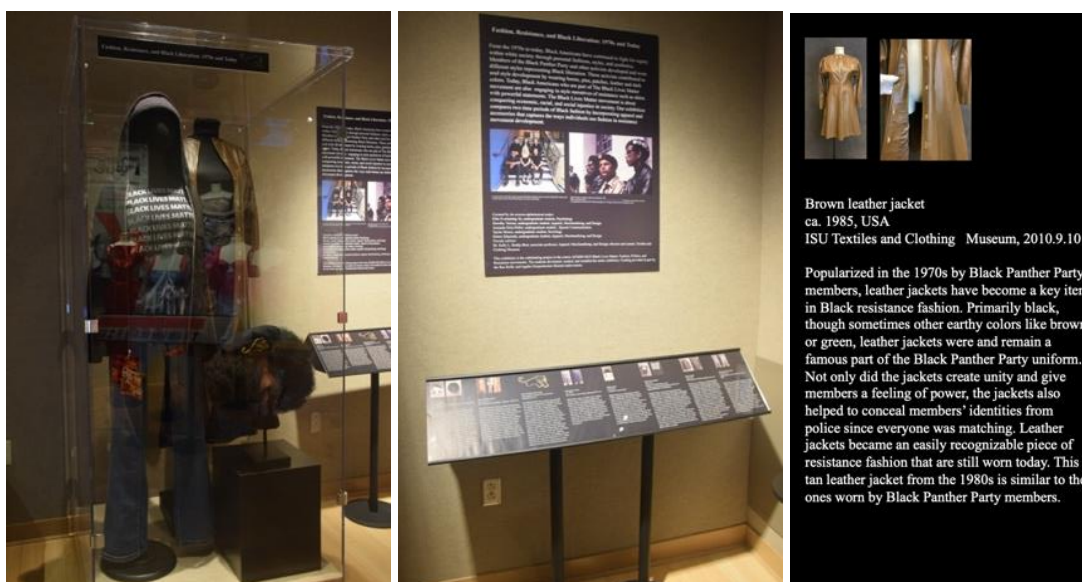


Figure 1. Left: the two looks featured in the exhibition. Middle left: introduction and label text. Middle right and right: example exhibition labels.

Teaching Effectiveness to Meet Course Learning Outcomes

Through the exhibition process, students were able to meet all three SLOs mentioned above. For example, they engaged with foundational concepts related to fashion, politics, and resistance movements when choosing which objects to feature in the exhibition and determining their big idea. For instance, students included a pair of bell-bottoms jeans from the 1970s; they researched the object name, who wore them at that time, the history of the material, and how they were used in protests. They analyzed the role of fashion for Black people in activism when reviewing primary and secondary sources to write their interpretive labels. They chose to include a newly purchased Black Lives Matter hoodie. They researched the hoodie history as it relates to Trayvon Martin (Rahman, 2016) and specifically thought about purchasing it from the official Black Lives Matter organization to support Black activism. Last, students were able to critique social justice issues in the fashion system when researching the black beret and the afro-wig. Through their object label, they highlighted the systematic racism Black people face when wearing natural hair (Ford, 2015).

Continuation Plans and Revision for Future

We plan to continue the project with modifications. First, we would include three revision opportunities for the interpretive labels. We also would include a step to practice delivering the curator talk. We also would include a step to document the exhibition through videos, photographs, and/or other media.

Final Reflection

Overall, this project serves as an example for undergraduate curatorial exhibition scholarship in a one-semester format. We hope that others can join the session and brainstorm how this form of scholarship can be refined and advanced in our discipline to promote undergraduate scholarship.

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