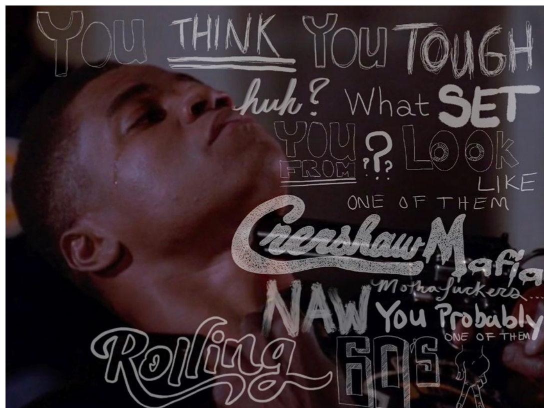
URBAN FASHIONS OF YORE

THE TENTH MAGAZINE



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Oh, what a time to be alive. The Nobel Prize-winning Gabriel García Márquez' captured the heaviness of living and loving in a medical crisis in *Love in the Time of Cholera*. And now, we no longer need nostalgia to capture history because we are now living history, living and loving in the time of corona. Not since over a century has the globe experienced a pandemic of this proportion, the coronavirus, COVID-19.

Once the World Health Organization established a pandemic was at our doorsteps on March 10, it only took seconds for so many to turn the growing need for face masks into a commodity with some cunning humans taking advantage of the ill-impressioned, with some others trying to pass the time with needle and thread for some charity due to hospital shortages, and more justly-hustling to supplement the income they would inevitably lose. And through this all, New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo and elected officials like Mayor Bill DeBlasio had announced it mandatory to don face coverings outside and especially inside of businesses. Immediately when I don a mask, I feel like I'm a character in The Hughes Brothers' *Dead Presidents*. Or, that others see me as that. Black and brown folks have a storied history with masks, whether it's the corner store or the plantation. I recently received a simple, black face mask that shows more of my face—that a human lies underneath. But up until then, I cautiously wore a bandana, oscillating between pink, mint green, and polka dots. With seeing eyeglasses off? No, on. I often wear top coverings, so I would never combine a mask, beanie, and the bandana simultaneously, sugarcoating the mask's history and sugarcoating my black body so that onlookers would feel disarmed and not as though I was bearing arms. I was much more acutely aware of anti-Asian and anti-black racism, so the proper coordination was a must.

When society imaginatively forces you into the margins, you are often acutely aware, aren't you? You're acutely aware of what it's like to fend for survival, to resort to public assistance, to fill the soap dispenser with water to make it stretch, to make a dollar out of fifteen cents, and you may not understand solitude, but you are intimately aware of its presence. When you are a woman, black, or queer, you are actutely aware of your body being sized up, taken in, ridiculed, beaten, forced, and even made pliable by the onlookers gaze twisitng and contorting you into a shortcut in their imagination—all in the strident effort to dehumanize the vessel that stands and lies before them. And yet, still, we rise.

As my own neighborhood gentrifies, it matters to me none, because it only takes one person to remind me that I am black and that I am gay. And trust me, the world has a sneaky way of reminding us that we don't belong, so we have to stay ready, so we ain't gotta get ready.

IN THESE STREETS

"You must be one of them Crenshaw Mafia motherfuckers."

The late John Singleton made one of the most seminal, naturalist films ever when he delivered *Boyz n the Hood* to us in 1991. The film and its cast of still-admired thespians touched me then as it touches me now. I recognized myself in those characters because the vivid insight was a daily life I was familiar with in Los Angeles – it was Compton, South Central, Bellflower, Newark, Southside Chicago, and St. Louis, on the world's stage. Tre Styles (Cuba Gooding Jr.), wasn't one of those "Crenshaw Mafia motherfuckers." But it didn't matter no-how. When best friends, Tre and Ricky (Morris Chestnut), are stopped by

the police, the black cop, heavily breathing over Tre at a forced pull-over haunts me every time I watch it. It's a warm California night and 1990s streetwear with bulky tennis shoes adorn these young boys driving down Crenshaw Boulevard. Suddenly, Ricky and Tre are stopped by a black and white police officer, pointedly Officer Coffey, the anti-black black cop serves up the vitriol. Ricky looks on helplessly, while the black officer violently leans into Tre force-feeding his Smith & Wesson into his neck and face, looking him up and down like he ain't worth a Nissin Cup Noodles, ain't worth shit, with grit in his teeth, his face snarled and menacing. And with heavy breath, he exclaims, "You think you tough, huh? What set you from? Look like one of them Crenshaw Mafia motherfuckers. Naw, you probably one of them Rollin' 60s."

Tre wasn't in either gang.

But the officer is declarative. There is no recuse or explanation. As the Smith & Wesson pierces Tre's neck, his muscles tighten as he swallows his own saliva, gulping down his pride to silence this damn near swan song. He is unable to fight back, unable to speak, but his emotion must come out somehow from somewhere. And it does. A single tear drips from the corner of his eye and slowly moves down his right cheek. There have been times when I watch that scene, alone, and a single tear escapes my eye as well. These are the notes of a Native Son.

For some time now (all my damn life and yours), blackness—our *Black Cool*—as Rebecca Walker calls it, has been under attack. When you read colonial travel diaries such as Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*, you are reminded that for centuries, black people have been looked upon with an odd gaze of fantasy, fetish, and fiction since forever. No one knew what to make of the "Dark Continent" and those who have transcended from the African Diaspora. And onlookers still gawk at our bodies, our fashion, our adornment with the same malignant intrigue they once had during colonial times—they were so intimidated by our beauty and culture so they named it savage, instead. Ratchet. Non-bourgeois. And Declassé. Today, they name it fashion and commodity and fourth-quarter sales projections—oh, that's that "Black Cool" Rebecca Walker is reminding us about. That "Black Magic" that Krin Gabbard is historicizing.

The fashion industry, particularly Anna Wintour, knew exactly what they were doing when brands fused with hip hop culture—a lifeline to revitalize the industry. Kris Kross had me wearing my clothes backwards, Cross Colours had me black and proud, canvas-clad Christian Dior purses were all the rage, and leather black Africa medallions lay clad on my cousin's chest back in the day. We been on!

For two years, I was a drive-thru cashier in high school, and I was slick with it, bouncing from the freezer, taking orders on my headset to pulling greasy tacos from the fryer, packing a bag, counting the change, mixing a milkshake, and all while taking the next order. I toiled on my job to buy my September fashions for the new school year. The Lakewood Mall's Up Against the Wall were where you could get your Enyce, Rocawear, Ecko Unlimited, Lugz, and Avirex. Now since my mother couldn't afford to pop tags, I often ended up with the discounted, last season versions from Ross or Marshall's. All good. I remember one year, my mother bought me a faux-Starter jacket; I never wore it. It stayed in my closet and I never said anything, but I'm sure it hurt her feelings. I just couldn't think of mustering the ridicule. Later on, I stacked my paper as we said in the 1990s, or as the children say today, I "secured the bag," and took $100 to Up Against the Wall and bought me an Avirex jumpsuit, a bright orange jumpsuit, with a distressed Avirex logo across my back. It was a mess, but quiet as it's kept, it was also a look.

ADORNED

So as the fashions of yesteryear become the looks of the present and future, I'm feeling a way about it. During Fall 2018, Fila held its first-ever fashion show in Milan. As an Italian heritage brand, it's been among us since 1911. I remember when I learned how to iron during the 1980s, I had this *slick* Fila tracksuit. Nylon. I went into the kitchen, plugged in the iron, had it on full-blast and burnt a triangular hole right through my pant leg. Oh, the devastation. But I had another Fila hoodie that was oh-so-mean, too. It had a zip-down hood that had "Marcus" sprawled in blue script on the inside and it laid flat once unzipped, adorning my upper back.

Chile, you couldn't tell me nothin'—not a damn thing!

I have no idea where my mom bought it from, whether it was bootleg or not, but one thing was for sure: it was the mood du moment and I was en vogue. But I'm feeling a way. When Fendi x Fila did the collaboration with rapper, Nicki Minaj, she boasted "I been on/Fendi prints on," which help set up their comeback. I felt a way when students strolled into the classroom with Fila shoes and sportswear from Urban Outfitters on the campuses I taught on. I didn't feel a way about the students, just the cultural shift. I felt a way when I saw the logo on a fellow subway passenger right in front of my face leading up from the subway stairs. This new generation of streetwear sartorialists aren't at fault for the past—but I still feel a way about it.

The young set walks around in a millennial-Gen Z-swag performing as the dopest. But unfortunately, the same urban trends that hipsters, yuppies, buppies, and the like enjoy today were the same trends that motivated racial profiling and police brutality of young black and Latinx men and women of the 1990s. These fashions, commonly found at the swap meet for a fraction of what they cost now, signified to police that you were affiliated with gangs when you were, in actuality, just walking home from school trying not to miss Darkwing Duck and Batman.

For a time, what has always been black, but popular culture has been jive, Ebony-Phonics, African American Vernacular, but with social media, you notice everyone has jumped aboard hood vernacular to sound cool. What was once frowned upon is now cool for all, not just "Black Cool."

But Fila, and street brands like it are back like no other. And while Fila may be waning eventually, something will soon take its place because street culture and style is here to stay overpriced, but we shall pay. LL Cool J already requested an "around the way girl," because that's just it – street culture has long been a fabric of the urban. "A girl with extensions in her hair, bamboo earrings, at least two pair. A Fendi bag with a bad attitude."

The "drop culture" of limited brands like James Jebbia's Supreme, has caused a frenzy for who is adorned in the finest, just so you can say, "Then I spent four hundred bucks on this, just to be like nigga you ain't up on this!" It's no wonder the brand that started as a skate shop in the mid-1990s is valued at over 1 billion dollars today. While street culture often refers to subcultures around the world from Japan to Los Angeles to New York to Oaxaca, let's be clear, it is often created from the have-nots. And much of it today, is gleaned directly from hip hop culture and underrepresented youth, where the purveyors and the pioneers are Latino and black.

During 2019, California became the first state to ban discrimination against "natural hairstyles," black hairstyles that is, after a slew of men and women were being discriminated against based on wearing their hair, naturally. After so much disgrace, it was black woman magic, Senator Holly Mitchell, who painstankingly worked to end hair discrimination by sponsoring the CROWN (Creating a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural Hair) Act before it was officially signed, ceremoniously, by California Governor Gavin Newsom. Should I be excited that so many black activists fought for this necessary moment to happen? As the bell tolls, I am reminded that, *Oh yes, this is what we must do always*. Endure and tread on. Our humanity must be corroborated and white-washed in order for our adornment to be fully accepted and our blackness to be exonerated. The soap company, Dove, released a study that noted that black women were 80% more likely to change their hair for conformity's sake, especially in the case of employment, as Chastity Jones did when she sued for such discrimination in 2013. In that lineage, these stories brought about the CROWN Coalition, overseen by Esi Eggleston Bracey. Within days of California's CROWN Act, a 13-year-old black boy in Texas had his hair colored in with black marker by a school administrator for wearing zigzags etched into his hair. His parents Dante Trice and Angela Washington spoke out. Apparently, he had violated the dress code. Such acts of racial injustice and dehumanization were also imparted on wrestler Andrew Johnson, who had someone forcibly cut his locks on live television and middle schooler Faith Fennidy, who was sent home for wearing a centuries-ritual African hairstyle: braids.

We speak your names.

But did that alone warrant such violence onto their persons? My heart seized and my eyes nearly wept. Oh, how I *lived* at the barbershop when I had enough hair upon my head for the buzzing clippers to fade every

other Saturday morning. It was ritual. I'd think long and hard about what zigzags I'd get, gleaning inspiration from Slick Rick—that quintessential line starting right at the temple and stretching back about 3 inches was usually what I decided upon. It was ritual. Didn't feel right without it. None of us did. It was ritual. We were adorned, and our outward expression was always kept in check with a thick-bristled boar's brush picked up from the nearest Sally's Beauty Supply. So when New Jersey champion wrestler Andrew Johnson had his locks cut from his head for the world to see at his match, we twisted in despair at such humiliation.

Again, I must ask, what warrants such violence onto our person?

BLACKNESS, ON LOAN

"About 1 in 1,000 black men and boys in America can expect to die at the hands of police, according to a new analysis of deaths involving law enforcement officers. That makes them 2.5 times more likely than white men and boys to die during an encounter with cops."

I read that on the 400th anniversary year of the first slave ship that arrived at Virginia. The article quotes a 2015 study for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention led by Professor Frank Edwards of Rutgers University that shows a leading cause of death for black men in this country is at the hands of an officer. It comes as no surprise to many.

When I was a young boy, I couldn't leave the house without a "clothes check" from my grandmother, mother, or aunts. Nike Cortez. Dickies pants. Ben Davis button-downs. Snapbacks. Calligraphy. Fila. MCM. Crocasacs. Pendleton flannel shirts. It was all off-limits. All of those looks symbolized gang culture to law enforcement and they were instructed, rather mandated, to spot it in the streets. The matriarchs in my family were skilled and insistent that nothing I or my cousins wore signalled to the authorities that we were one of them Crenshaw Mafia motherfuckers—niggas and Native Sons to be discarded. Back when Compton was considered one of the most dangerous U.S. cities, streets in neighboring cities such as Bellflower were literally changed from Compton Boulevard to Bellflower Boulevard because, oh, yes, they believed that would solve the issue of interlocking systemic racism.

Today, I can walk around in high-water khakis, my Nike Cortez, a fresh white tee, and mainly go unscathed because white people, and not just skaters, also dress that way now. It's street culture for the masses. Today's fashion climate of Fila, Filas (with the socks), Pendleton, Vetements, Hood by Air, Opening Ceremony, Off-White, and everything in-between are given new life through creative directors and fashion houses—commodification of hood themes, if you will. Mad respect to Virgil Abloh, though.

Though Kehinde Wiley, whose work constantly juxtaposes blackness with urban fashions of yore gives me a sense of pride, such as when I gaze at *La Roi a la Chasse* (King on the Hunt). In this painting, Wiley does what he does best, depicting beautiful black bodies at the forefront of grandiose and often traditional European backgrounds, centering black bodies in the past where whiteness was exalted and blackness lay erased. So, it was only fitting that Wiley would also paint the first black president of these United States – a portrait resting at the National Portrait Gallery along with Amy Sherald's historic depiction of Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama. The African lilies, Hawaiin jasmine, and Chicagoan chrysanthemums in Barack Obama's portrait firmly situate the intersections of his heritage and his often-questioned citizenship. There is so much beauty, power, and grace in these black bodies that policing them was not enough, many must also try to dismantle them because it is in the dismantling where the souls of black folk are at risk, but we will not go quietly no matter how large the black marker used to drown our style and our existence.

And yet, like so many symbols that crucified black and brown bodies for decades, then they are suddenly commodified, rendered arbitrary and ahistorical, thrown into a photo studio, given a luxe model to don the prints and hues (throw a green tropical plant in the back and foreground for good measure) and all of a sudden the hype and the image is reduced to what it has been all along: fashion.

MARCUS BROCK is an Afrofuturist, a college professor, an attaché, a flâneur and a postmodern vagabond. A frequent contributor to The Tenth, who always maintains a Black queer view of history and offers harmonious, yet unrestrained prose to the quest for liberation.