

Jae Jarrell: Do-It-Yourself Design (D.I.Y.) for the Revolution

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From 1967 to the present, creating a positive image for African American people has been the goal of a group of artists known initially as Cobra, the Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, and later Africobra, the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists.¹ A close-knit community of male and female African American artists, members of Cobra and Africobra came together to challenge negative depictions of African Americans within American popular culture. Their objective was specific: to produce art that communicated the power, possibility, and beauty of African Americans. Africobra's determination to humanize African Americans diminished by caricature and the imagery of pervasive racial degradation was expressed in, "Black, positive, direct statements created in bright, vivid, singing cool-ade colors" (Jones-Hogu 2). The politics of Black Nationalism and the African Diaspora were among the forces that shaped artists' social and artistic agendas.

While the paintings and posters of Africobra are perhaps most familiar, Africobra member Elaine Annette "Jae" Jarrell (1935-) designed clothing that showcased how the American fashion system could be maneuvered to clothe African American women seeking to identify with Africobra's values. Stylish and expressive of the popular trends of the day, Jarrell's designs exemplified a radical form of what is known contemporarily as Do-It-Yourself (D.I.Y.) design. Jarrell's clothing combined handmade processes, common in D.I.Y. practice, with a subversive re-fashioning of familiar forms. Her fashions took aim almost single-handedly at legacies of dressing for racial uplift, demanding wearers take control of their own representation through clothing situated outside of the white dominated mainstream. Perhaps inevitably, white audiences appropriated her clothing in

¹ Cobra was founded by Jae Jarrell, Wadsworth Jarrell, Jeff Donaldson, Carolyn Lawrence, Gerald Williams and Barbara Jones-Hogu in 1967; Cobra changed its name to Africobra in 1969. Africobra continues in the present day with a changing body of artists.

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varying degrees thus challenging the singularity of Jarrell's D.I.Y. design practice. From one perspective, the appropriations exemplified D.I.Y. design's ability to cycle between the margins and the center of the fashion system. Yet such outcomes were not necessarily of concern to Jarrell, or Africobra, who focused on inscribing separate cultural identities and forms for African Americans.

Jarrell's D.I.Y.

Paul Atkinson views D.I.Y. design as fundamentally the domain of the amateur (1). The construct, familiar in definitions of D.I.Y., equates authenticity with a designer's place within a hierarchical system of specific training and education. Atkinson acknowledges the particular power of D.I.Y. design so defined as, "a more democratic design process of self-driven, self-directed amateur design and production activity carried out more closely to the end user of the goods created" (1). The notion of the D.I.Y. amateur as standing apart from the expectations associated with a given system of design practices and audiences relates to Jarrell. However, for her part, Jarrell was a formally trained artist and designer who maintained her own labels. Within the binary of professional designer versus amateur D.I.Y. creator, Jarrell occupied a third space negotiating elements of both paradigms. She employed professional techniques to construct garments for herself, and other women like herself, whose objectives were not met by American mainstream fashion marked as white.

Jarrell's D.I.Y. element was therefore born of necessity, and yet at the same time expressive of Africobra's objectives. Designs such as Jarrell's advanced clothing as part of Africobra's call for internal transformation as a means for African Americans to change negative views of themselves brought on by white culture. Jarrell used fashion to "voice opposing positions and stances on justice" (Von Busch 69) afforded by D.I.Y.. The messages communicated by Jarrell's clothing had few, if any, precedents in American or African American fashion. The very act of establishing a D.I.Y. fashion practice for African American woman was significant: communicating statements of Black Nationalism radical. As designs intended to read across the African Diaspora, Jarrell's fashion also spoke to community building on global levels. The larger project affirmed D.I.Y.'s capacity to go beyond the local and national. Zack Bratich and Heidi Brush position D.I.Y. as a process for crafting, "an activist community in a way that spatially and analogically links experiments in making futures differently" (234). In such

context, Jarrell's D.I.Y. fashions delivered the clothing for like-minded activism anywhere.

Fashioning Culture

Jae Jarrell was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1935, the granddaughter of a tailor who was interested at an early age in, "making clothes in order to have something unique" (Bouthiller 65). Jarrell studied at Bowling Green State University and, in the early 1960s, moved to Chicago to attend the school of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1963, when Jarrell met soon to be fellow Cobra and Africobra artists Wadsworth Jarrell (her future husband) and Jeff Donaldson, she was already operating her own fashion boutique *Jae of Hyde Park* on Chicago's south side (Douglas 19). Jarrell's clientele included white women, and she built part of her business designing clothing for models who needed to provide their own wardrobes (Douglas 64-5). However, when she joined Cobra, and later Africobra, Jarrell focused upon what she describes as Africobra's directive, "to reinvent yourself, reinvent how you were, reinvent your whole manner so that you had a fresh voice" (Douglas 65). To reinvent the image of African American women, Jarrell had to face their uncertain position in American fashion. Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark emphasize Jennifer Craik's definition of fashion as, "a technique of acculturation—a means by which individuals and groups learn to be visually at home with themselves in their culture" (23). Yet the use of the singular when describing one's culture encapsulates the problem Jarrell and other African American women faced as they sought to establish themselves as an independent clientele within a white dominated society. In what culture could African American women feel "visually at home" in terms of fashion?

Beauty and fashion choices were, for many African American women, a highly conflicted experience of combatting messages communicating their inherent unattractiveness set against white styles of presentation. The earliest fashion magazines for African American women published after Emancipation cultivated an aspirational agenda derived from white culture. In the late nineteenth century *Ringwood Journal* edited by African American writer Julia Ringwood Coston, had for instance, "as examples of what was considered most fashionable, the magazine offered images of white women on its fashion pages and in its advertisements and articles" (Rooks 50). Physical features of white models such as straight hair and light complexion were construed as components of an American beauty ideal, while

modest garments constructed from delicate, feminine fabrics communicated respectable dress standards. The pressure for African American women to adopt such paradigms contributed to the growth of an African American beauty industry dedicated to hair-straightening products, skin lighteners and other necessities for attaining the correct appearance. Failure to conform to the configuration was more than a gentle disregard for social norms. As Tanisha Ford explains, “for some black women, going out without their hair pressed connoted ugliness, social unruliness, Africanness, and even manliness” (650).

When Cobra and Africobra arrived on the scene in the late 1960s, the expectation for African Americans to follow white American beauty ideals was under scrutiny. In the 1960s, African American women and men began to express their commitments to Black Nationalism often by challenging established norms concerning dress and appearance. Seeking new alternatives, they began to express pride in their physical characteristics, “by flaunting rather than concealing their features,” (Giddings 153). while natural hair styles or Afros became popular. For many Americans, rebelling against fashion norms was a constant in the 1960s as variations in choice of clothing, “reflected the social instability of the decade” (Giddings 152). However, the restrictions for African American women in particular were removed less easily. Bain reiterates that, “by framing well-groomed women as the embodiment of racial progress and respectability, beauty cultures placed a heavy burden on black women” (Giddings 59). If an African American woman sought to abandon the roles of respectability and racial uplift assigned to her by constituencies within both white and African American cultures, she found few fashion models to communicate her new identity. At the same time, Cobra and Africobra were working to develop visual statements participating artist Barbara Jones Hogue described retrospectively as ones, “to identify our problems and offer a solution, a pattern of behavior or an attitude” (Douglas 29). Jarrell’s dress *Ebony Family* was one such solution.

D.I.Y. and the *Ebony Family*

In 1968, Cobra selected the theme *The Black Family* for a group series dedicated to visualizing positive images of the African American family. Three years earlier, the Johnson administration produced a report titled *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, also known as the Moynihan Report, in which the African American family was described as the product of a “tangle of pathology” (Klug

48). The Moynihan Report was part of Johnson's War on Poverty and typified the construction of African Americans as a dysfunctional community within American society whose situation remained so due to internal failures, rather than external realities of racism and economic exclusion. For the series, Jarrell designed the dress *Ebony Family* (1968).² Made of velvet with velvet collage and applique, *Ebony Family* incorporated the style trend of the day known as the shift which, with its lack of a defined waist and bust, marked the decade's "gradual breaking down of long-established traditions of gender dressing" (Laver 265). The rebellious quality of the dress's shift form was enhanced by the popular mini skirt length. However, the D.I.Y. applied elements differentiated Jarrell's dress from mainstream trends. *Ebony Family* featured appliqued portraits of a mother, son, infant and father, all of whom resembled members of the Jarrell family. The appliqued letters "B" for Black and "F" for Family reinforced *The Black Family* theme and the role of the Jarrell family as part of a larger community of African American families. "B" and "F" also signified a relationship of heightened significance for Black Nationalists like Jarrell in the late 1960s: the family of one's origin, and the family of the African Diaspora.

Brown and Shaw identify within Black Nationalism two defining, and often competing, approaches: community nationalism directed toward living successfully within white dominated American society, and the complete economic and cultural departure of separatist nationalism (22). Malcolm X, an influential figure for Cobra and Africobra, viewed African Americans as, in Manning Marable's words: "an oppressed nation-within-a-nation, with its own culture, social institutions, and group psychology" (482). For Malcolm X, the African American nation-within-a-nation described by Black Nationalism was a source for positive change on an individual, community, and global scale. In *Ebony Family*, Jarrell's commitment to Black Nationalism was clear. Worn by Jarrell or copied, presumably by other African American women, *Ebony Family* was more than an articulation of the personal is political. The dress circulated intentionally outside of America's mainstream fashion production. Jarrell introduced a mail order service for her clothing (Douglas 25) which facilitated another means for in-community proliferation and profit she controlled. Jarrell's D.I.Y. fashion transcended the day to day and inserted the wearer into a much larger context.

² *Ebony Family* is pictured on the Brooklyn Museum of Art's Permanent Collections website: www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/210701.

Revolutionary Suit

Luvaas locates a D.I.Y. ethos within D.I.Y. production characterized by, “the attitude that fuels it [production], the sentiments that surround it [production], and the logic that guides it [production]” (4). Jarrell’s companion piece for *Ebony Family*, the *Revolutionary Suit*,³ expressed an ethos of Black Nationalism that left no room for question as to the requirements for social and political change in American and throughout the African Diaspora. “Can an unspoken history of violence and brutality find a language in the swish of a skirt gently caressing an ankle?” (Rooks 47). *Revolutionary Suit* was a definitive answer of “no” to the question. In many respects, *Revolutionary Suit* was a fashioned embodiment of Malcolm X’s statement in 1964 of victory in the fight for the rights of Black people to land ownership and dignified treatment, “by any means necessary.”⁴ Made of tweed and suede, *The Revolutionary Suit* included a jacket trimmed with bullets and bandolier. Although she never wore *Revolutionary Suit*, Angela Davis, member of the Black Panthers, was, according to the related folklore, an inspiration for Jarrell’s design.⁵ Was the wearer of the suit willing to commit a violent action to further the objectives of Black Nationalism? Jarrell incorporated with certainty the question into the design.

Jarrell sold versions of *Revolutionary Suit* as part of her line *Jae’s Revolutionary Fashions* while the suit was also featured at Africobra exhibitions across the country throughout the early 1970s (Douglas 40). Jarrell’s use of the two-piece suit for women popularized by Coco Chanel added controversy, in part due to criticisms of Chanel’s introduction of the suit after World War II. Chanel’s

³ Jarrell was photographed by Doug Lewis in 1970 wearing the *Revolutionary Suit*. The photograph is available on the Brooklyn Museum of Art’s Library Collections website: www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/archives/image/64116. A view of the suit on a mannequin is accessible on the Brooklyn Museum of Art’s Permanent Collections website: www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/223730.

⁴ Malcolm X delivered the speech containing the phrase on June 28, 1964. The text of the speech is included in *Malcolm X, By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter by Malcolm X*, Pathfinder Press, 1970, pp. 35-67.

⁵ The bullets used in Wadsworth Jarrell’s portrait of Angela Davis with bandolier attached to the canvas were wooden (Douglas 40), and by extension it would seem so were the bullets used in Jae Jarrell’s suits.

development of her suit for women in the early 1950s is viewed by some fashion historians as successful for “eliminating ornament in favor of a uniform” (Klein 254). By “taking ornaments away from women, [Chanel] transgendered them [women],” (254) Klein argues, an act which he views as a form of liberation because in part, women were no longer identified derisively as feminine or lesser because of the constraints of cumbersome accessories. Whether the Chanel suit supports a transgendered appearance is open to debate; the lack of stereotypically feminine details such as decorative trim or flowing silhouette does not necessarily connote transgender. Nonetheless, when re-formed by Jarrell, the Chanel suit, with skirt shortened to a mini length not employed by Chanel, and accessorized by bandolier with bullets, read as a military uniform specifically. Buckley and Clark explain that in fashion, “articulation of the everyday also recognizes the possibility of reinvention and resistance as the fashion system is refused, recycled, and redefined” (23). If the Chanel suit was everyday fashion for upper class white American culture, *Revolutionary Suit* was more than a redefinition for the “possibility of reinvention and resistance.” *Revolutionary Suit* was the resistance.

Whose D.I.Y.?

From the perspective of employing D.I.Y. design in the service of fashioning an entirely new identity for her clients, *Revolutionary Suit* and *Ebony Family* were successes for Jarrell. That her fashions gained attention from the mainstream fashion system dominated by whites was a more problematic accomplishment. The potency of Jarrell’s D.I.Y. design revolved upon distance from the mainstream fashion system, and instead upon ideals of economic and cultural separatism. *Jet*, an African American magazine based in Chicago, articulated the problem in the January 28, 1971 issue under the headline “Black Revolt Sparks White Fashion Craze” (*Jet* 42).⁶ As the editor explained of the adoption of Jarrell’s bandolier “look” by white women:

It had to happen. White fashion designers have finally gotten hip. For years white Americans of all sorts have been plagiarizing Black art, music, and dance and laughing all the way to the bank. And now the fashion world,

⁶ The complete issue of *Jet* may be viewed through Google books with the article featuring Jarrell on pages 42-5: bit.ly/3j3lt8B.

long known for its creative larceny, is getting into the act. It is “borrowing” from the Black Revolution. (*Jet* 42)

Re-formations by whites of elements of such as the bandolier in *Revolutionary Suit* were all too familiar rip offs of African American culture, cultivated at the expense of interest in the agendas or motivations behind the material. The reality that the Black Nationalism informing the new fashion craze was aimed, ironically, against the ideologies of white society seemed of no consequence. *Jet's* analysis highlighted the ways in which the co-opting of a D.I.Y. design by the “wrong” community had the potential to lessen the impact of the design by transforming politically significant fashion into a mere fad. The financial implications were also negative. As soon as a design entered the American fashion system, profits left the hands of the designer and were enjoyed instead by predominantly white economic entities.

Matthes explains: “cultural appropriation can harm by interacting with pre-existing social injustices to compromise and distort the communicative ability and social credibility of members of marginalized groups” (353). Jarrell had no control over the use of her fashions by those outside the clients for whom she worked. Africobra understood the nuances of appropriation by the African American community with which they identified, as well as outsiders. In the words of Africobra artist Nelson Stevens: “the real danger is trying to communicate and understand... [i]mmmediately the image maker risks being superficial, creating images too easy for the maker and receiver” (Jones-Hogu 2). Jarrell’s designs were, from their beginning, targeted for a small group of wearers largely ignored by American fashion, and the attention she gained from mainstream receivers was short-lived. Her clothing remained relevant for her African American base, however. Throughout the 1970s, Jarrell continued to develop a body of work that furthered Black Nationalist ideas and showcased certain stylistic approaches: “signature moves of which I am most proud—uncharted drape, refreshing accessory design, fine finishing, with style-setting coordination” (anxiouscatfilms). She also began to incorporate new forms from West Africa in her designs.

Transafricanism

The cover of the same issue of *Jet* that criticized whites for copying the use of the bandolier, showcased Jarrell’s West African styled floor length dress and head-tie ensemble, also with bandolier. The dress was modeled by fellow Africobra artist

Barbara Jones-Hogu.⁷ In her design, Jarrell replaced the use of a West African wax-print cloth for head-tie and dress in favor of acrylic, a popular easy-care fabric favored in the 1970s. She also unified the piece with a single fabric color rather than combining colors and patterns more typical in a West African context. Jarrell's head-tie is derived from a form known by different names across West and Southern Africa, and as the *gele* in parts of Nigeria. The head-tie is often paired with a long dress or a two-piece blouse and longer skirt known in Ghana as the *Kaba* (Gott 13). Jarrell's decision to use the *Kaba* and other elements of clothing from West Africa was perhaps, upon first consideration, reminiscent of other trends in the 1970s toward the so-called ethnic look (Laver 267).

A practice of borrowing from cultures outside of what is often defined as Western fashion, the ethnic look allowed designers to introduce new elements to audiences in search of the unusual. On another level, the ethnic look encouraged wearers to identify with a culture other than their own, much in the fashion of a tourist displaying a recently acquired and superficial taste from somewhere else. Rovine explains the limitations of the latter in the context of Africa:

While boubous, robes, raphia skirts, beadwork and caftans fascinate Western observers, and may provide inspiration for Western fashion, in popular parlance they are not fashion in their own right. Instead they are described by terms such as "costume," "dress" and "garb," words often modified by the overarching adjectives "traditional," "native," "indigenous," and "authentic." None of these terms carry implications of change over time. (Rovine 190-1)

Rovine's analysis raises the question as to whether Jarrell's design engaged in appropriation that risked marginalizing, and portraying as static or unchanging, the cultures from Africa to which she looked for inspiration. Matthes argues: "policing the boundaries of cultural groups can construct common understandings of 'real' or 'authentic' group members that serve to disenfranchise those who do not meet all of the relevant criteria" (355-6). By incorporating forms from Africa, was Jarrell associating her new designs with a more accurate, or even the only, experience of identity for African Americans?

Jarrell's and Africobra's views of Africa are essential toward understanding the place of forms from Africa in Jarrell's D.I.Y. design. Jarrell explained: "where we

⁷ Please consult the link in note six to view the image: <https://tinyurl.com/Jet-01281971>.

felt empowered is when we began to study our African heritage, out of our own curiosity; and at some point more formal courses as we had the opportunities to take them. We began to see the sophistication in African sculpture. It made you chuckle, it was so beyond anything modern. I mean, it was more modern than modern” (anxiouscatfilms). Africobra artist Michael D. Harris⁸ explicates what Jarrell terms heritage in terms of transafricanism, a concept put forth by Africobra artist Jeff Donaldson. Harris describes transafricanism as, “that which expresses an ‘African’ sensibility through the specific forms and elements found in the milieus of its artists” (34). The emphasis is placed upon the individual artist so that in Jarrell’s D.I.Y. ensemble, all parts work together to create a meaning that is neither authentically “African” nor “African American,” but Jarrell’s. Stated another way, Africobra’s transafricanism, “relieved the artist from the burden of defining in singular terms and therefore delimiting fashion the promise of Afrocentricity as a context for expression” (Ellsworth 33).

Conclusions

In 1977, Africobra represented North America at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos, Nigeria.⁹ As part of the North American zone Africobra formed a: “self-defined ‘nation within a nation’” (Apter 56) evidencing their Black Nationalist foundations. Among the objectives of FESTAC ’77 was, “to facilitate a periodic ‘return to origin’ in Africa by black artists, writers and performers uprooted to other continents” (FESTAC ’77 Souvenir 13). Jarrell chaired the FESTAC ’77 Committee of Creative Modern Black and African Dress (Douglas 101-2). Jarrell described the relationship of Africa to her designs in the following terms: “I was struck by the fact that colonized African nations were beginning to be decolonized. And of course, fashion sort of takes a

⁸ Michael D. Harris has been a member of Africobra since 1979.

⁹ The First World Festival of Negro Arts was held in Senegal in 1967.

note of activities occurring in the news, things that would affect expression” (Bouthiller 68). In America, Jarrell’s D.I.Y. designs of the late 1960s and 1970s were themselves acts of decolonization in terms of the liberation of clothing for African American women from the values of white culture and production, and notions of race-based powerlessness, or even ugliness. Fifty years later, as America faces the tragedy of a society still bifurcated by race, and the same system of racial injustice, Jarrell’s D.I.Y. design revolution is more than relevant. Her D.I.Y. design practice embodies a way toward empowerment that counters mainstream white culture while providing a place in American society for African Americans to express their independence and humanity. That Black Lives Matter was the core motivation for Jarrell and Africobra from the very beginning.

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