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Re-Dressing Race and Gender

The Performance and Politics of Eldridge Cleaver's Pants

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Abstract: In Paris in 1975 Eldridge Cleaver, exiled revolutionary African American activist, former Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party, appeared in photographs and newspaper articles wearing, and discussing, pants he had designed. The major innovation in Cleaver's pants was a redesigned crotch: instead of the usual button and zip front opening, his pants featured a soft panel with a protuberant fabric appendage into which Cleaver intended the wearer's penis to fit. Why did Cleaver channel his intelligence and creativity into menswear at that moment? How did Cleaver's penis-positive pants design resonate in 1975 with Black politics and gender politics? And why am I, a queer transgendered man, writing about these pants? Through this article I hope to contribute to a discussion in fashion studies about the materiality of bodies and the role of self-fashioning, particularly for those living in resistance to dominant codes of gender and race. I situate and analyze Cleaver's pants in a broad context of the postwar politics of dressing and redressing race and gender in the United States, with references to a longer American history, as well as to a global context of clothing in a postcolonial era. The pants, in both their design and in the act of being worn, materialize acts of raced and gendered insurrection, but in a web of historical power relations that privilege whiteness and cisgender masculinity.

KEYWORDS

- race
- gender
- body
- dressing
- pants

In the spring of 1975, Magnum photographer and filmmaker René Burri stood on a Parisian sidewalk across from St. Eustache Church, located in Les Halles, the newly renovated market and shopping area in central Paris. To a passerby it would appear Burri was photographing naked female mannequins through the plate glass window of a fashionable boutique **(see fig. 1).** But among the mannequins stood a tall Black man, hands on his hips, looking out at the viewer. Eldridge Cleaver, a former leader of the Black Panther Party and fugitive in exile from the United States, modelled for Burri the pants he had designed: high-waisted black pants with a white panel in the centre and continuing down the inside leg, and a soft black panel at the crotch featuring a protuberant fabric appendage into which Cleaver's penis fit snugly.[1]

FIGURE 1

Eldridge Cleaver, Paris, 1975. Photo by René Burri. Courtesy of Magnum Photos.

Cleaver's foray into fashion seems peculiar, an unusual trajectory for a Black revolutionary in an era still shaped, in the United States, by the demands of the Black power movement and the U.S. government's attempts to suppress such challenges to the white state. In Europe, particularly in 1975, race politics resonated geographically both west to the United States and African American liberation struggles, east to France's former colony, Vietnam, and its post-colonial civil war violently shaped as a proxy Cold War battle by the United States, as well as south to France's former colonies in North Africa.

So why did Cleaver, a revolutionary in exile from the United States, channel his intelligence and creativity into menswear at that moment?

How did Cleaver's penis-positive pants design resonate in 1975 with Black politics and gender politics? To answer these questions (and raise others I cannot answer), this article analyzes Cleaver's pants through the context of US Black history (Spencer; Blain) as well as a nod to Foucauldian theories of power relations applied to raced and gendered bodies.[2] Through this article I hope to contribute to a discussion in fashion studies about the materiality of bodies and the role of self-fashioning, particularly for those living in resistance to dominant codes of gender and race.

One aspect of contributing to such a discussion is providing readers with some context to my writing this article. This interjection goes against established tenets of academic writing but I choose to challenge those tenets in order to address the politics of scholarly research and writing. As a white, queer, transgender man, and a tenured academic, my subject position begs examination in relation to the contents of this essay. Why am I writing about a Black revolutionary's least known and, when known, frequently mocked efforts in clothing design? My privilege

empowers me to spend time thinking about this topic and to obtain research funding to look through Cleaver's private archives held in a university far from my home; my privilege also allows me to feel entitled to step into, examine, and write about a Black man's life and work. Given that privilege, I am ethically bound to do my best not to harm through my words and actions a man, and others like him, who suffered violence, police scrutiny, incarceration, and impoverishment by the white supremacy from which I, and others like me, have benefited. This acknowledgment serves neither to excuse me nor any other scholar from responsibility, nor to preempt criticism. This acknowledgment serves to put me, and you my readers, on notice that my acts of research and writing may have done harm. I call on myself, and you, my readers, to hold me accountable.

My interest in Eldridge Cleaver's pants design was first piqued in graduate school, when I heard fellow students of American history discuss something about a design called "the Cleaver sleeve." I heard it was some sort of codpiece designed to enhance Cleaver's penis and thus his masculinity.
At that time, I was trying to name and live my own gender and sexual identity. I understood myself as a gay man but I lived in a body designated "female"; I expressed my queer masculinity as a "boyish" lesbian (neither then nor now am I butch enough for "butch"). I never saw an image or read a description of this "Cleaver sleeve," as then I could not "Google image" myself into that curiosity. The relationship between clothing and gender presented a site of struggle for me as well as other queers: I searched then, as I still do now, in boys and menswear sections of retail stores for clothes to dress (and represent publicly) my embodied self. I joked back then about opening a clothing store that would solve such problems, and I planned to call it "Victor's Secret."

I returned to Eldridge Cleaver's pants design last year, now able to actually see images of what he had made thanks to the treasure trove of evidence existing online. After having transitioned, I am perhaps even more interested in how other people dress their crotches in particular — dressing the body parts they wish to emphasize, or hide, or disguise; dressing the genitals that they wish were or were not there; dressing to "pass" or dressing to differ. My dressed body appears male; my undressed body appears trans — edited and enhanced according to my choices by surgery and

by hormone therapy. My body is re-dressed — I have provided redress to my body myself from the harm done by a rigid binary of "male" and "female"; and I continue to dress and re-dress my body through explorations of gender expression. Clothing my body as redress facilitates a conversation with myself, and others I invite, about the cut, colour, texture, movement, and associated meanings of the clothing I choose or desire.

I love Eldridge Cleaver's pants. I'd wear them. I love their audacity. I love their absurd over-expression of embodied masculinity — in those pants his penis was dressed yet also almost undressed. He exposed his racialized masculinity according to his choice and design. But I am also a little afraid of what Cleaver meant by this design, by this redressing of his racialized masculinity. Cleaver's violence towards his partner Kathleen Cleaver remains a persistent rumour; Cleaver's history of sexual assault is undeniable; his homophobia and misogyny stand out clearly; Cleaver's association with anti-feminists such as Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum is documented in his own archives.

This essay situates and analyzes Cleaver's pants in a broad context of the postwar politics of dressing and redressing race and gender in the United States, with references to a longer American history, as well as to a broader global context of clothing in a postcolonial era. And lurking in the background of all that is me, trying on his pants in my imagination.

Wondering how I'd feel dressed in pants built for a penis, in pants built perhaps to signify the designer's misogyny and homophobia, in pants that also represent an insurrection against the power of white men over Black bodies.

Joanne Entwistle, in her essay "Addressing the Body" (2007), provides dress scholars with a theoretical framing of what she refers to as "[t]his meeting between the intimate experience of the body and the public realm, through the experience of fashion and dress," the subject of her reflections (274). Her emphasis on the embodied experience of "getting dressed" places the varieties of the human body at the centre of what clothing means and why bodies and clothing should be central to social science and humanities scholarship. Taking issue not only with such scholarship's refusal to address actual bodies but also with dress studies' separation of dress from the body, Entwistle argues for "the idea of dress as situated bodily practice as a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding the complex dynamic relationship between the body, dress and culture" (276-7). Entwistle demonstrates the efficacy of drawing on Michel Foucault's analysis of power via his examination of the relationship between power and knowledge, expressed through the state's imposition of discourses — "regimes of knowledge" — with the body as the particular focus of the disciplining effect of discourse. Control of the body (and thus the "body politic") is achieved through systems of surveillance.

Foucault's most powerful (and well-known) example was that of the carceral state, exemplified for him metaphorically through Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon" — the perfect prison of constant assumed surveillance that would produce self-surveillance among prisoners and thus submission to the disciplining regime without the state needing to employ physical control (281-2). Entwistle then points to the limits of Foucault's discourse theory, namely "his failure to acknowledge embodiment and agency." To amend these limits of Foucault's post-structuralist theory, particularly when applied to the study of dress, Entwistle discusses how feminist theorists have used the notion of "reverse discourse" (contained within Foucault's original theory), which acknowledges agency and the *possibility* of resistance — rather than assuming all bodies are passive objects of power. Feminist scholar Lois McNay provides, for Entwistle, a possible way through the limits of Foucault's power-body theory by drawing our attention to his later work, in

which he accepted that he had "perhaps insisted too much on the technologies of domination" (288). Foucault, McNay points out, proposed in his later work (such as that found in volumes of his *History of Sexuality*) that "technologies of self" operated in dialogue with, and potentially in resistance to, technologies of domination within discourses of control. For the purposes of a version of fashion studies that pays attention to how subjects fashion themselves through bodily techniques (as suggested by Marcel Mauss' theory of embodiment), "reverse discourse" offers us a way to analyze how forms of dress (actual garments or different ways of wearing conventional garments) operate within a productive tension between submission and resistance (286-8). But while Entwistle and McNay's work has drawn important attention to issues of gender, it has not addressed the historical and contemporary constructions of race in relation to technologies of self or bodily techniques. And, as I hope to address through my own scholarship, fashion studies has yet to address the power of transgender bodies. The tension between submission and resistance, in relation to both gender and race, offers a starting point to interpreting Eldridge Cleaver's engagement with clothing design in the 1970s, in particular his seemingly incomprehensible pants. I'll argue here that Cleaver's designs and the contexts in which he created, executed, marketed, and then abandoned them occupy the African-American male's white-enforced subject position between submission and resistance.

The pants, in both their design and in the act of being worn, materialize acts of raced and gendered insurrection in a web of historical power relations that privilege whiteness and cisgender masculinity.

Surveillance and incarceration shaped most of Eldridge Cleaver's life. Born in rural Arkansas in 1935, he moved with his family at age eleven to Los Angeles. The Cleavers sought the expanding job and housing opportunities for African Americans that drew many other similar families from the American South and Southwest in the 1940s, their experiences closely following the account provided by urban cultural historian Josh Sides (36-56). According to Cleaver's own account, as a teenager in L.A. Cleaver quickly became involved with illegal drugs and petty crime, spent time in youth detention centers, and moved on to more serious crimes (*Soul on Fire* 65-9). He was first incarcerated in an adult prison at age eighteen, in Soledad, on a felony drug charge. In 1958, he was convicted of rape and assault and spent nine years in prison in Folsom, San Quentin, and Soledad jails. In jail Cleaver educated himself through a prison study group and through copious reading. He joined the Black Muslims, revered Malcolm X, and read extensively in Marxist-Leninist theories (75-7). In December 1966, in his early 30s, he was released on bail and immediately became involved in radical left, and later specifically Black, political movements. At the time of Cleaver's release the Black Panther Party had existed for only two months, yet Cleaver, a gifted writer and speaker, quickly became their Minister of Information. In 1968 Cleaver led a group of Black Panther Party members on an ambush of Oakland police officers. Two police officers as well as Cleaver were wounded in the gunfire; seventeen-year-old Panther member Bobby Hutton was killed. Cleaver was charged with attempted murder and, in fear for his life within the California prison system, fled the United States into exile with the aid of supporters — first to Cuba, then to Algeria, and later to France (130-3).

Having spent his young adulthood engaged in criminal activity and living in jails, Cleaver had no history of regular paid employment nor had he experienced any established romantic relationships until he met, and married, fellow Black activist Kathleen Neal in 1967. Work with the Panthers and marriage to Kathleen occurred in a matter of months after leaving jail. Pregnant with their first child, Kathleen Cleaver joined her exiled husband in Algiers in 1969. Their second child was born in 1970 during a trip to North Korea. They lived in Algiers together until Eldridge moved to Paris in 1972, joined the next year by Kathleen and the two children (163-5). The Cleaver family lived on the temporary largesse of the new postcolonial Algerian government of Houari Boumédienne, who provided a $500 per month stipend to various political fugitives who passed through Algeria in the late 1960s. The North Vietnamese also aided the Cleavers, and by extension the Black Panther Party, by making the former Vietnamese embassy available to them as a home and as a place from which to continue their political work in exile (137-9).

In his years in exile in Algeria beginning in 1969, and travelling through the socialist and communist states of the period, Cleaver played a central role coordinating international networks of anti-colonial and revolutionary movements. Visited in Algiers by fellow Black Panthers, by luminaries of the American left, and major cultural figures, Cleaver and his wife Kathleen presided over a rotating revolutionary salon. But as Americans in exile, beholden to the temporary generosity of a new postcolonial leadership, the Cleavers had few resources and could not settle into Algeria. Their move to Paris — Cleaver moved in 1972 and his family joined him in 1973 — represented a desire for greater stability for themselves and their two young children. It also represented the likelihood of an exile more disconnected than that in Algiers, especially in the face of Cleaver's dramatic falling out with Huey Newton and other former comrades in the United States.[3]

As we can see from this rapid shift between 1967 and 1969 from incarceration, to emerging political revolutionary leader, to husband and father, to fugitive, Cleaver created a life for himself, and later for his family, out of his ability to perform a series of roles, changing rapidly between them as needed.

An autodidact and master of word and image, Cleaver survived, and at times thrived, by performance. The archive of Cleaver's life, including his own biographical works, reveals each performance, their stages, and how he dressed for each role. Looking back over his archive, one wonders how Cleaver's life story might have evolved if he had been spared the pressure and necessity of so many performances — some of submission and some of resistance.

In her groundbreaking study of the Black dandy, cultural studies scholar Monica Miller framed her analysis of Black male self-fashioning through a discussion of the performativity of Blackness — the idea that, as she writes, "Blackness is always already 'performed'" (5). Early encounters between white North Americans and Black Africans relied on the staging of race and the commodification of Black bodies: slave auctions staged Blackness through the display of Black men, women, and children on the selling blocks, with a white audience of buyers in attendance. This was the first site of the construction of "Blackness" as an identity, produced by the erasure of the slaves' humanity as well as their previous identities based not on skin colour but on membership in a clan or tribe, a family group, or an ethnic group in the region of Africa from which they were sold.

As Miller describes, and as other scholars have documented, the slave markets of the American South established the image of the "Black buck," the physically impressive African American man (3-5).[4] Slave auctions afforded the captive men and women no dignity.

Not regarded by buyers or sellers as humans entitled to limit the exposure of their bodies to the gaze or touch of others, African men and women endured fingers in their mouths and on their faces to examine their teeth and eyes, hands on their backs, arms, and legs to feel muscles and joints, questions to the trader about their approximate ages to factor into their potential reproductive capacity. Displayed naked or minimally clothed, a buyer's touching of the human chattel could afford erotic pleasure to the buyer (and onlookers) and served to further assess the slaves' bodies as commodities and as engines of reproduction. The sexual stereotyping of African men and women began at these auctions, continued at the sites of their enslavement and, as scholars such as Mark M. Smith have shown, embedded in a visceral white southern "sensorium" (37), combined with additional murderous violence after abolition and on through the following decades of "freedom."[5]

White fantasies and mythmaking about Black men's genitals emerged from these sites of exposure and assault.

White fantasies endangered Black men by producing the at-once feared and desired stereotype of the Black rapist — the violent Black male with a supposedly untamable sexual drive targeting white women. These fantasies, entangled with the value of the Black slave's body as an investment, increased the potential power of Black men and thus the need by whites to restrict their freedoms. Sexual objectification and assault by whites of Blacks gained power in an era when, especially for the slaveholding gentry class of the American South, seeing the naked body of someone

of their own class and race rarely happened. The visual access to the exposed bodies of Black men and women, bodies over which white owners and overseers had total control, produced sexual access for white men and sexual fears and desires among white women. White men, fearing their loss of control over Black men and white women, contributed most to the myth of the Black rapist, a man supposedly consumed by desire for white women's bodies. As scholars of lynching have shown, now with the aid of new online data sets, white society justified their violent repression of enslaved Black men, and their lynching of free Black men in the south, by means of these and other fantasies and fears (Bailey and Tolnay 147). By the mid-1960s, a century after emancipation, these stereotypes continued to resonate, perhaps more than ever as a white response to African American political efforts challenging white supremacy and the growing success of civil rights cases in the courts.[6] Denied a version of "manhood" so freely granted to (and defined by) white men, Black men's twentieth century gender identities developed in response to the distortions of white supremacy.

Eldridge Cleaver's behaviour towards women suggests his place within this legacy of American racialized sexual violence. An examination of his 1970s pants designs, of how Cleaver himself framed the meaning of those pants, and the connections to a longer history of misogyny and sexual violence requires reference in this article to one of the most difficult aspects of Cleaver's life story, as told by himself in his two major publications, namely his admissions of rape. In *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver's famous collection of essays written during his incarceration in Folsom State Prison, California, Cleaver writes of his deliberate use of rape as a "weapon" against white authority. Understanding fully how white men had raped generations of Black women, both slave and free, and how white men had produced the image of the Black rapist as an over-compensation for their own fears, desires, and acts of violence, Cleaver's assertion represented a twisted, "logical" response. Cleaver's account in *Soul on Ice* claimed he approached his use of rape as a weapon systematically — recognizing that before he deployed the weapon against his intended target (white women) he needed to "practice" first, gaining skill and developing a method:

> **I became a rapist. To refine my technique and *modus operandi*, I started out by practicing on Black girls in the ghetto … and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey … Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values and that I was defiling his women…**

Cleaver frames this section with explanations of how he developed his violent attitude towards white women and then how, when he returned to prison for his crimes of rape, he felt he had dehumanized himself and could no longer "approve the act of rape." (33-4)

In *Soul on Fire,* the book Cleaver wrote and published after his return to the US in the mid-1970s, he offers a further account of his rape methods — one that describes his actions as a controlled performance. Cleaver wrote:

> **The play-acting of the criminal is hourly theater. When, in my late teens, I started to develop the rape routine in the motel circuit, I usually posed as an investigative agent or private detective coming to question a couple in their room. After tying up the man, I would first look at their I.D. cards, check out who they were, and quickly discover they were not husband and wife. I'd act like I was writing this information down on a pad, creating a scene that would plague their operative paranoia in whatever they were into or shouldn't have been into. They wouldn't dare report me as I had masqueraded as some off-balance investigator. All the crime shows on television played into my act. (67)**

In this description, Cleaver's act seems squarely positioned as "reverse discourse" as he takes control over his performance and the unwilling co-performers. He is mobile, quick-witted, and knows how to use the fears created by established discourses of marriage and sexual behaviour to silence his victims.

Yet at the same time, one can read this described performance as embedded in that aforementioned tension between submission and resistance: Cleaver performs a version of Black hypersexual and criminal masculinity that aligns exactly with white fears and myths established during slavery and persisting through popular culture. As Cleaver states in a reverse understanding of his subject position: "All the crime shows on television *played into* my act." In fact, Cleaver played into the limited, racist roles available to Black men on television as in real life.

Through literary and visual texts, Miller's analysis of the Black dandy and his place in American racial history provides a key conceptual frame through which to understand Cleaver's interest in clothing and in dressing his gendered and racialized body at a point in his life when his political performance seemed to be losing an audience. Cleaver, throughout his adult life, navigated and survived American racism through performance, as did many other African Americans. White supremacy required Black Americans to perform affective states and attitudes such as inferiority, deference, happiness, and passivity for whites of all classes to avoid legal, verbal, and physical assaults. Cleaver's stunning pants design represented the height of his performer-designer creativity, as well as a point of crisis while he hovered between an old and a new role: between his loneliness and growing irrelevance in European exile, and the compromised freedom he returned to in the United States.

In *Soul on Fire*, Cleaver describes falling into a deep depression in France, during which time he experienced a spiritual epiphany of some sort and became a devout Christian. At the same time, during what seems to have been a burst of creative energy, Cleaver turned to what may have been a long term but as yet unrealized interest in clothing and its connection to gender. In western Europe and the United States, from the late 1960s through much of the 1970s, the gendering of street style clothing shifted in response to the women's movement and the liberatory politics of youth rebellion, not all of which Cleaver agreed with.

Cleaver's interest in style and gender took various forms over his life, stemming from his necessary performativity as a gifted but socio-economically disadvantaged Black man.

His involvement with the Panthers, for example, may have provided a brief but intense outlet for his fashioning skills. According to historian Steve Estes, Cleaver played a major role in the look and style of the Black Panthers. As Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party, Cleaver coordinated the communication of the Party's words and images to the press and the public.

Estes states that before Huey Newton went to jail, "Cleaver had him pose for a photograph in full Panther uniform with a shotgun in one hand, a spear in the other, and African shields lying at his feet" **(159; see fig. 2)** The poster made from this photograph contributed to the popularity of the 1967 "Free Huey" campaign and adorned the bedroom walls of numerous radical college students. Janice Cheddie analyzes this photographic poster image of Newton in its "migration" from "portraiture, into new reportage, street protest, and domestic decoration."

FIGURE 2

Huey Newton. Styled by Eldridge Cleaver, 1967.

Cheddie is particularly interested in the "direct, confrontational gaze of the male Black Panther at the camera" that she argues is a "recurring bodily stylization" seen throughout Panther imagery and positioning them as active agents in the street as a site of struggle, a stylization in contrast to that of the Black civil rights workers operating in the southern United States before 1965. The direct gaze from the Black male photographic subject into the lens of the (usually) white photographer and on into the eyes of the viewer challenges the power relations of race as well as of a mainstream media hostile to, or patronizingly enamored of, the Black male subject (337-88).[7]

Cleaver developed his own narrative about what appeared to many observers as a sudden interest in clothing design. He does not claim a longstanding interest in clothing or fashion, and does not connect his new designs with his earlier work styling the Panthers' look and message. Instead, Cleaver's narrative drew on his past as a prisoner and his present as a new player in the "battle of the sexes" so current in the 1970s. In news interviews conducted with Cleaver concerning his pants designs after he returned to the United States in November 1975, Cleaver claimed he had learned to sew while a prisoner in San Quentin jail. But, clearly, basic sewing skills from jail did not produce his desire or the required skills to design pants. Whatever needle skills he had acquired in jail served more as a sufficiently "manly" explanation as to why the former Panther would engage in a pursuit so closely identified in the twentieth century with women and white gay men.

According to notes in his archives, Cleaver attended a seminar in Paris in about 1974 given by gay fashion designer Pierre Cardin.[8] Apparently, at the seminar Cleaver heard Cardin declare he was planning to redesign men's pants to emphasize the buttocks. This outraged Cleaver, as it suggested to him the overt

sexualization of the male ass — to Cleaver's mind, a homosexual emphasis. That Cleaver understood an emphasis on drawing attention to the male ass as only of interest to homosexual men suggests his homophobia, part of a deeper anxiety about both masculinity and sexuality. Ignoring or ignorant of the female gaze and female desire, Cleaver assumed only gay men would have an interest in seeing the contours of men's asses emphasized or flattered in redesigned pants. Cleaver imagined the male ass only as a site for the gay male gaze — a surrogate for or prelude to gay penetration. Cleaver's years in jail, an all-male environment in which homosexual activity was common, undoubtedly contributed to his association between men's asses and the homoerotic gaze.

Mary Blume, a reporter with the *International Herald Tribune*, interviewed Cleaver in Paris on August 14, 1975. Blume described Cleaver's Latin Quarter apartment as having a crayoned sign on the door that read "Cleaver Unlimited" and, she wrote, "next to the books on religion, economics and psychology are library copies of *The Glass of Fashion* by Cecil Beaton and *Dressmakers of France*." Cleaver told Blume, as he held forth to her in his apartment wearing a pair of his self-designed "Cleavers," "What I want to do is establish myself as an authority on male clothes … I want to solve the problem of the fig leaf mentality. Clothing is an extension of the fig leaf; it put our sex inside our bodies. My pants put sex back where it should be." In explaining the meaning and relevance of his pants, Cleaver told Blume the design had come out of his interest in sociology. One could look, he said, at some of the things he'd done "as research. I can even rationalize my career as a rapist. I'm a sexologist, an unwashed sexologist in that I am one with no academic credentials but with a lot of practice. Out of that, these pants." Cleaver's sketchbook notes reveal not only his design ideas but also his preparation for writing and talking about his pants, both before and after his return from exile **(see fig. 3 and fig. 4).**[9]

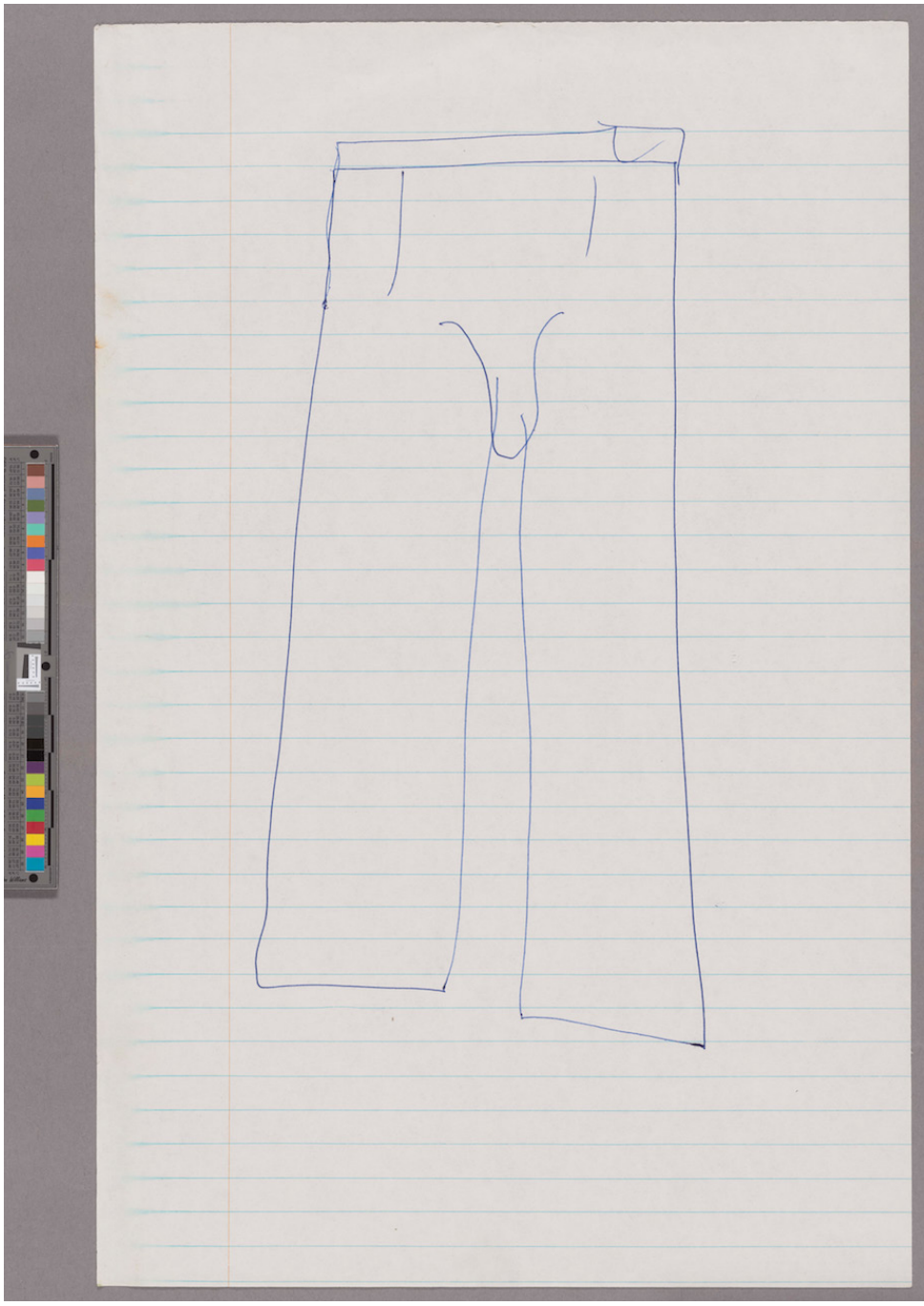


FIGURE 3

Sketch from Eldridge Cleaver's sketchbook. Eldridge Cleaver Papers, BANC MSS 91/213, Carton 13, Folder 54. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

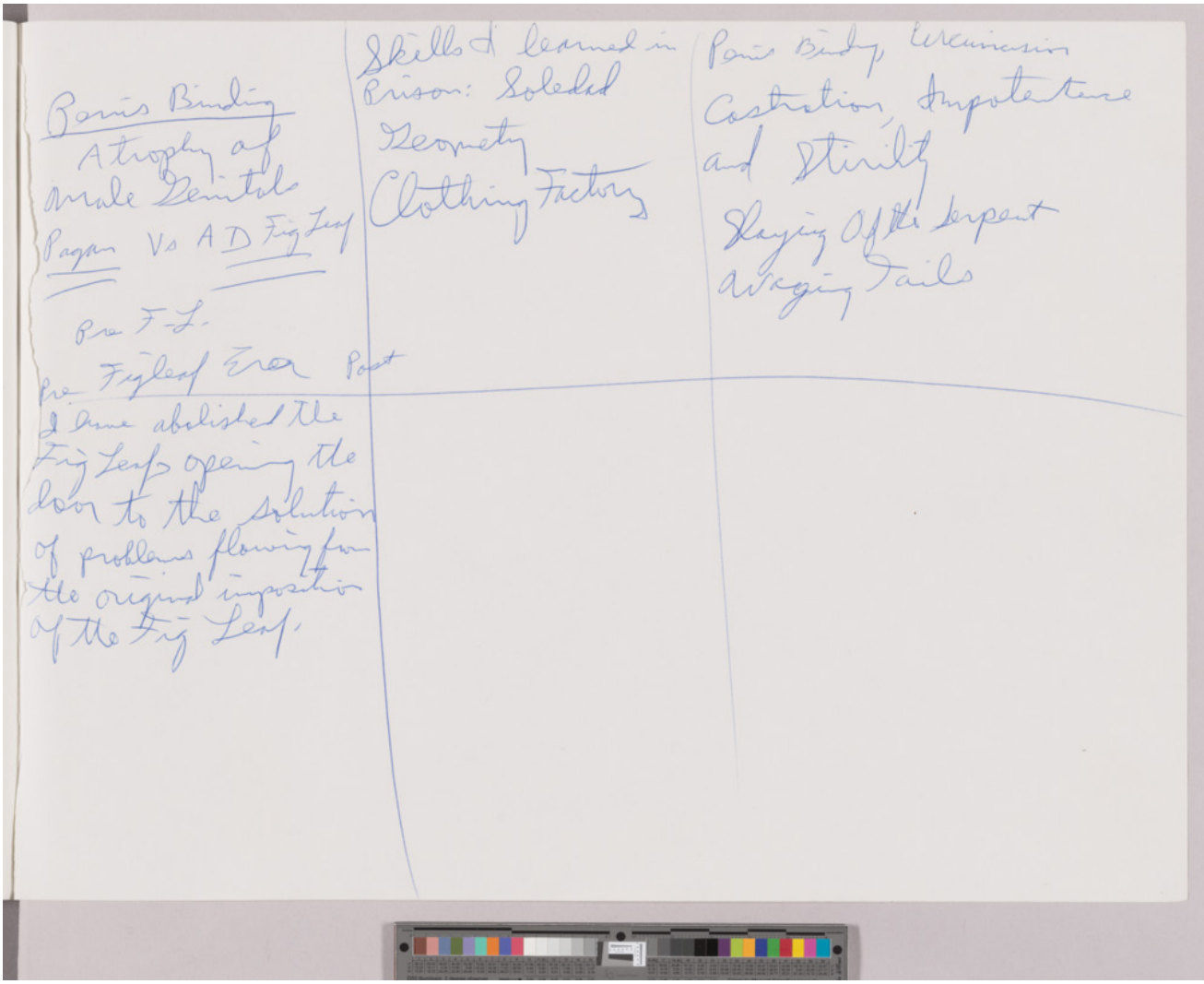


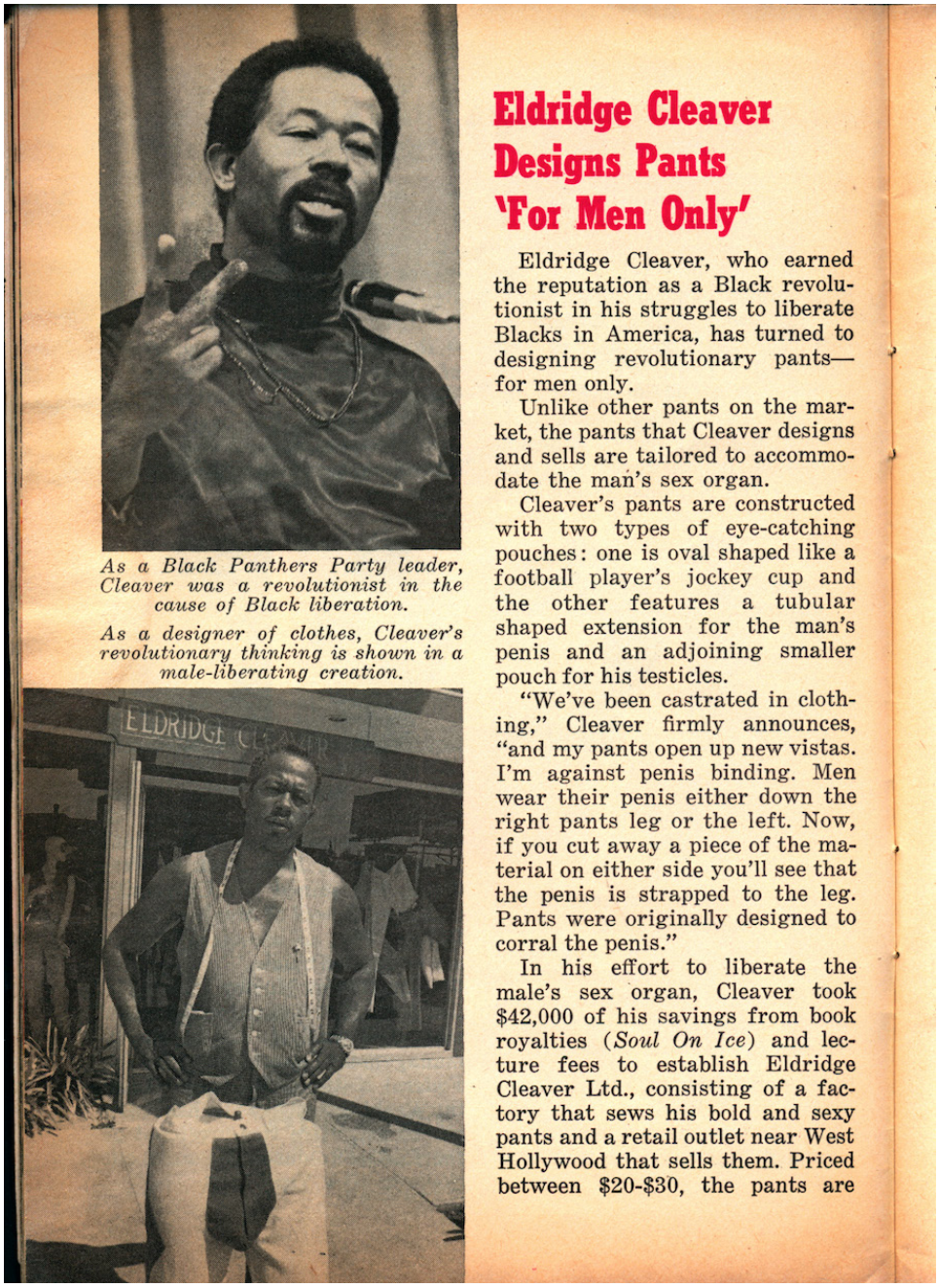
FIGURE 4

Notes from Eldridge Cleaver's sketchbook. Eldridge Cleaver Papers, BANC MSS 91/213, Carton 13, Folder 54. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Cleaver vociferously opposed the "unisex" look of the mid- and late-1970s.[10] His pants, he claimed, "will abolish it." Cleaver's opposition to unisex style is fascinating in its ferocity. It seems Cleaver could not bear the idea of clothing that could erase, or disguise, the physical differences between bodies designated male and female. Cleaver's misogyny and homophobia as roots for his pants design come through clearly in a September 1975 interview in Paris with Mark Stillman and other student writers from the *Harvard Crimson*, the college's student magazine. In the article Cleaver is quoted as saying: "Well, the ideas for these pants came out of an article I'm writing about the uni-sex movement, attacking the uni-sex movement. While I was writing the article I started thinking of tangible ways to express my ideas, you know? And these pants are the natural outgrowth of that … [T]his is a direct attack on uni-sex. Women can't wear them, right? Take a look at what you guys are wearing. You're wearing sissy pants" (Stillman). Back in the US, as Cleaver launched his clothing business in Los Angeles, he gave many mainstream press interviews and continued to claim his pants would solve the gender problems he identified in the later 1970s: "I think that clothes get to the heart of our sickness, all the problems with sexual identity, sexual roles," Cleaver told a reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner* in September 1978.

The men's pants and unisex styles of the 1970s meant, Cleaver claimed, that a man's "second skin is castrated. It destroys the magnetism between men and women." The "binding," as Cleaver saw it, of a man's penis in modern pants "has led to the atrophy of the male organ."

Cleaver's clothing store opened on La Cienega Boulevard, in West Hollywood, on July 1, 1978, where he sold his pants for $20 and $30, in a range of fabrics and colours. By 1978 West Hollywood was becoming established as the gay neighborhood of Los Angeles, which adds a queer twist to this story of Cleaver, his pants, and his championing of the male body. A short feature article in *Jet* magazine, from September 21, 1978, entitled "Eldridge Cleaver Designs Pants for Men Only," depicted Cleaver and his store **(see fig. 5).** In addition to the store, his business, called Eldridge Cleaver Unlimited (ECU), encompassed a small manufacturing facility located on the edge of downtown Los Angeles, on East Olympic Boulevard where he employed two seamstresses and a designer. Business records from ECU detail the mundane paperwork of setting up a business — articles of incorporation, rental and tax costs of the two locations, and California state regulations governing employees' rights and duties. The records do not, of course, divulge the responses of Cleaver's neighboring business owners, nor those of passersby; the records also remain silent on how frequently Cleaver himself worked in the store or interacted with customers and took active pride in his new venture.



As a Black Panthers Party leader, Cleaver was a revolutionist in the cause of Black liberation.

As a designer of clothes, Cleaver's revolutionary thinking is shown in a male-liberating creation.

Eldridge Cleaver Designs Pants 'For Men Only'

Eldridge Cleaver, who earned the reputation as a Black revolutionist in his struggles to liberate Blacks in America, has turned to designing revolutionary pants—for men only.

Unlike other pants on the market, the pants that Cleaver designs and sells are tailored to accommodate the man's sex organ.

Cleaver's pants are constructed with two types of eye-catching pouches: one is oval shaped like a football player's jockey cup and the other features a tubular shaped extension for the man's penis and an adjoining smaller pouch for his testicles.

"We've been castrated in clothing," Cleaver firmly announces, "and my pants open up new vistas. I'm against penis binding. Men wear their penis either down the right pants leg or the left. Now, if you cut away a piece of the material on either side you'll see that the penis is strapped to the leg. Pants were originally designed to corral the penis."

In his effort to liberate the male's sex organ, Cleaver took $42,000 of his savings from book royalties (*Soul On Ice*) and lecture fees to establish Eldridge Cleaver Ltd., consisting of a factory that sews his bold and sexy pants and a retail outlet near West Hollywood that sells them. Priced between $20-$30, the pants are

FIGURE 5

Cleaver standing behind half-mannequin displaying one of his pants designs, outside his clothing store Eldridge Cleaver Unlimited, Los Angeles, 1978. From *Jet* magazine, September 21, 1978.

These photographs from 1978 **(see fig.6 and fig. 7),** taken by Nik Wheeler, an internationally renowned photographer of the Vietnam War and other key political events, show Cleaver in a small showroom in downtown Los Angeles, exhibiting his clothes for the first time. Wheeler photographed Cleaver's collection in the California Mart. Founded by the Morse family in the 1960s, the California Mart provided rentable spaces for businesses to display and promote their products, and meet with the press and other interested parties. Now called the California Marketing Center, the site remains a major exhibition and marketing institution for the Los Angeles' fashion industry. In these images, Cleaver sits at a table with numerous Polaroid photographs in front of him, showing the range of his clothing designs.

Cleaver's menswear is displayed, pinned on the walls and hanging from the tile ceiling. The walls have green fabric fig leaves attached to them as a kind of backdrop for the clothing. The green fig leaf formed the insignia of the "ECU" label for Eldridge Cleaver Unlimited products, designed by Cleaver himself as can be seen in his archives **(see fig. 8 and fig. 9).** In his sketchbook notes, and later in interviews, Cleaver referenced opposing the "fig leaf" mentality as justification for his bold new designs **(see fig. 4).** Perhaps the most peculiar photograph from the Wheeler shoot shows Cleaver sitting back in his chair with a blond-haired mannequin of a small boy set on the table in the foreground of the image, dressed in Cleaver-designed children's overalls complete with a child-sized version of the protruding pouch for genitals that defined his adult men's pants and overalls **(see fig. 7).**

FIGURE 6

Cleaver photographing his clothing designs, California Mart, 1978. Photograph by Nik Wheeler. Courtesy of Alamy.

FIGURE 7

Cleaver in the California Mart, displaying his clothing designs. Photograph by Nik Wheeler, 1978. Courtesy of Alamy.

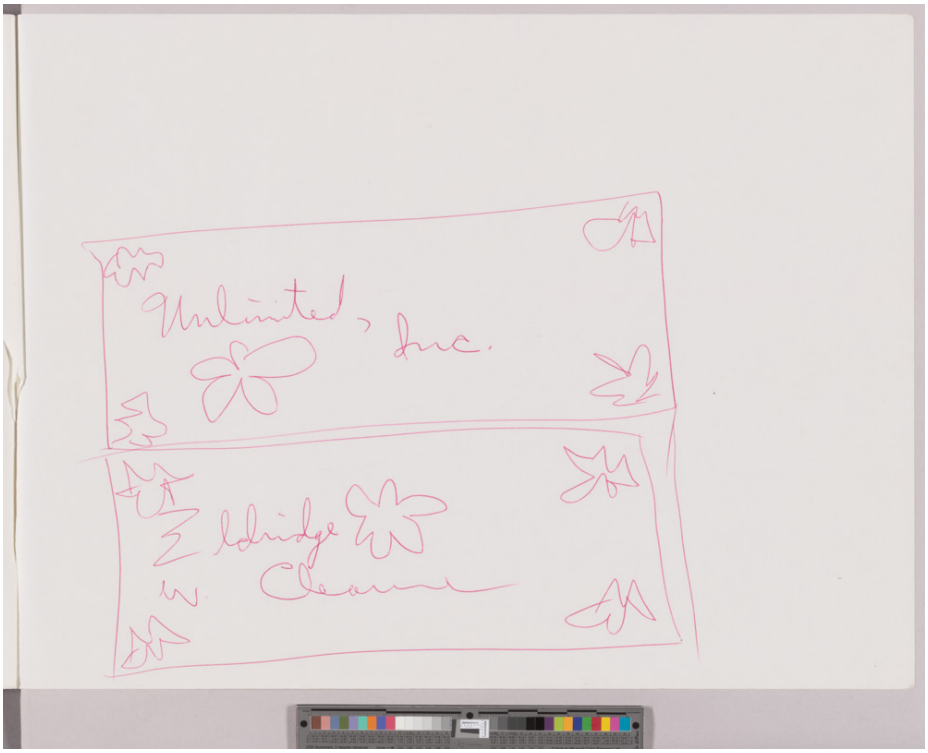


FIGURE 8

Cleaver's sketches for his clothing line labels. Eldridge Cleaver Papers, BANC MSS 91/213, Carton 13, Folder 54. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

FIGURE 9

Finished labels for Cleaver's clothing line. Eldridge Cleaver Papers, BANC MSS 91/213, Carton 13, Folder 57. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

It is clear from Cleaver's notebooks that he seriously considered formal training in sewing and clothing design after he settled in Los Angeles. His notebooks list the addresses and phone numbers of various sewing and fashion design courses and schools in the Los Angeles area. He may or may not have followed through with these intentions. But on December 26, 1979 Cleaver obtained and filled out an application form, and paid an application fee, to the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising (FIDM), then located on 17th St. in Los Angeles. The form instructed him to report for admissions review on January 16, 1980. When FIDM opened in the Garment District of downtown Los Angeles in 1969 it was the first fashion college to open on the West coast, and Los Angeles had become the second largest fashion center in the United States — especially for the growing markets in sportswear and swimwear, both with close ties to the entertainment and leisure industries burgeoning in southern California since the 1950s.

It may come as no surprise that Eldridge Cleaver Unlimited failed to attract a customer base for Cleaver's radical pants design. Unpaid bills related to the business mounted and form a large proportion of the archival records of ECU. Demands from utility companies for unpaid power bills, overdue rent on the store and the manufacturing facility, dating from 1978 to 1980, speak to the problems plaguing many businesses in the struggling US economy of the later 1970s, but especially to Cleaver's distraction from his fledgling fashion business toward his political and religious commitments. Throughout his sketchbooks and notebooks of ideas and designs for his pants, appointments for prayer breakfasts and other religious speaking engagements appear frequently. Cleaver could never focus exclusively on his clothing designs and business.

By 1980 Eldridge Cleaver seems to have left his interest in fashion design behind. Soon after his return to the US he became involved with, and a sought-after speaker for, the New Right, which incorporated an evangelical Christian conservative movement, then taking over the Republican Party. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 represented a major victory for the New Right whose ideology continued to dominate US conservative politics through the remaining decades of the twentieth century. Cleaver never saw any contradiction between his penis-positive pants and his crusading for Christ. But Cleaver's political and religious allies did not share his enthusiasm for the pants nor his idea that the Bible provided support for his effort to free the penis. We cannot know if Cleaver

might have further developed his interest in clothing design if he had been less useful to the religious Right. Since Arthur De Moss, a major funder of the religious Right, had paid Cleaver's $100,000 bail to get him out of jail nine months after Cleaver surrendered to US authorities and returned home, Cleaver was unlikely to bite the wealthy white hand that fed him and his family (*Soul on Fire* 207).

By 1981 Cleaver had become involved with the Mormon Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS) and spoke regularly at LDS events. He was baptized into the Mormon Church in December 1983. Dressing in conservative three-piece suits, dress shirts, and ties, Cleaver costumed himself for this later life performance. But when he died in 1998 of heart failure, he had spent the last ten years of his life in the Bay Area struggling with a crack cocaine addiction for which he was arrested a few times in the 1990s and imprisoned briefly in 1990. He moved back to southern California in the later 1990s and worked as a diversity consultant for the University of LaVerne.

Let us return now to Les Halles, to the shop window in which Cleaver stood, posing, for René Burri. Cleaver looks directly out of the window into Burri's lens and into the viewer's eye. Is Cleaver's look, his returned gaze, that of the female fashion model? Or is it a confrontational gaze — that of the Black man looking directly back at the assumed white viewer and the actual white male photographer? Who did Eldridge Cleaver imagine he was looking at, as he adopted different poses for Burri during their shooting session? Is Cleaver feminized, wittingly or not, by being positioned as a mannequin among mannequins in the boutique window?[11] Cleaver occupies but does not control foreign terrain at that moment — a French, capitalist, retail space, dedicated to the stylized display of merchandize via manufactured bodies (mannequins), a site usually associated with the "feminine" cultures of shopping, looking, and fashion designed to elicit the male gaze of desire and, sometimes, financial support. Janice Cheddie, in her article about challenging

established subcultural theories of race, gender, and resistance, draws on Judith Butler's use of Derrida's concept of "citation." Cheddie applies this intersection of Butler's theories of gender performativity and bodily techniques with Derrida's citation theory being premised on the centrality of "difference" to rethink the assumed masculinity embedded in the ideas of "style" in studies of subcultures — in particular as applied to the imaging of Black bodies. With reference to reading documentary photographic images of Black bodies in the Black Power era of the 1960s and 1970s, Cheddie states:

> **The use of the concept of citation, and its inherent repetition and difference, allows us to locate "Blackness" as performative assemblages of race and gender that are made and remade through the process of bodily stylization and discursive disciplinary regimes — not simply a rearrangement of object, dress, and adornment. (346)**

If we apply Cheddie's analysis to Burri's image of Cleaver, we can circle back through the "citations" embedded in the image-as-image as well as in the image's content of Cleaver's body, pose, self-made garment, and geographical and temporal sites. By doing so, we can situate the image, and by extension Cleaver's (self-)fashion(ing) efforts, within the assemblages of gender, race, sexuality, and the urban produced from the surveillance and restriction of the rebellious Black body, especially in the United States.[12]

Cleaver's shop window pose in his self-made pants cites the visual regime of the nineteenth century slave markets discussed earlier, where white buyers bought and sold Black bodies; his pants cite the European early modern adornment of the (white) penis via the codpiece that asserted the wearer's status and power; his pants also cite the penis as the signifier of Black masculinity within the ongoing paranoid regime of white supremacy.

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Cleaver's pants design was in dialogue with both France and the United States in the 1970s: he challenged the fashion industry dominance of Paris, its whiteness and (in his mind, it seems) it gayness and female-centredness; by emphasizing his penis — at once exposed and clothed via the prophylaxis of fabric — he challenged an American history of the sexual objectification of

Black bodies, especially its fear of Black male sexuality, symbolically castrated via enslavement and then symbolically and actually by the extreme surveillance and violence of the post-slavery era. The staging of the photograph positions Cleaver as an object on display within the context of Parisian public streets, in which Black bodies comprised a rare sight, codified as foreign, out of place, and associated with French and American colonial power.

In 1980, as Cleaver shifted from menswear radical into a conformist religious conservative, gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe produced his (later notorious) photograph entitled "Man in Polyester Suit" **(see fig. 10).** The man in question is African American, as we can tell from his dark-skinned hands and his penis that hangs through the open fly of his suit pants. Mapplethorpe depicts this Black man by means only of his penis and hands. The rest of his body, and most notably his face, is excluded from the photograph. He is a nameless, partially clothed torso, similar to a mannequin in usage, exposing his penis to the gaze of the photographer and the viewers of the finished photograph. In fact, the man thus depicted was Milton Moore, Mapplethorpe's lover at the time.[13] In 1980, Eldridge Cleaver had put his penis back in his pants and donned a similar suit, re-dressing again his race and gender.

Robert Mapplethorpe's photographic work represented a new radicalism, coming from a queer art world long repressed and ignored by the straight establishment as well as more conventional elements within an emerging white gay male middle class.
His work later became a target of the same Christian conservatives with whom Cleaver allied himself in the 1980s, as they sought to radically cut arts funding by arguing that queer artists used government funding to produce and display "immoral" and "indecent" art works. "Man in Polyester Suit" undoes the work Cleaver started with his pants design, returning the Blackmale body to a synecdochal genital representation, an image controlled by a white man for his pleasure. He is dressed in a suit, the uniform of European middle-class masculinity but it is, we are told, a "polyester" suit — a cheap version of powerful attire. This depiction could suggest a "Black dandy" in the tradition studied by Monica Miller or a man who had been dressed for the occasion, and for specific effect, by Mapplethorpe.

It matters little, since the man does not get to communicate with the viewer on his own terms — there is no gaze, confrontational or otherwise, from subject to photographer to viewer here, only the gaze of the viewer at his Black penis.[14]

FIGURE 10

***Man in Polyester Suit*, 1980**
© Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission.

Cleaver's performance in Burri's photographs, in the interviews he gave in France and the United States about his pants design, in his establishment of Eldridge Cleaver Unlimited, and in the photographs Nik Wheeler took of him and his merchandise in the California Mart and in his West Hollywood store should be understood as combining together into an autobiographical act. Through thinking about, designing, making, and modelling his pants, and selling them to others, Cleaver assembled his prior performances of rebellion against white male power, incarceration and control, sexual violence, political revolutionary, master communicator, escape, and exile. But the implied power of this autobiographical act soon acquired the pathos of a swan song, as Cleaver's inability to control his audience's responses and his miscalculation of his own power in the mid- and late-1970s United States required him to shift into the costume and persona of conservative, white-coded, neo-conservative masculinity if he wished to survive in the America he returned to as a paroled criminal, the role of "free Black man" always already denied.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. René Burri (1933–2014) was a Swiss photographer who joined Magnum in 1956. He is best known for his iconic portraits of Che Guevara and of artists such as Pablo Picasso and Alberto Giacometti.

2. The body of scholarship examining intersections of race and gender in African American history is large and growing. See recent scholarship by Robyn Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*, Duke University Press, 2016 and Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. In addition: a useful collection introducing the reader to an historically wide range of essays is Devon Carbado, ed., *Black men on Race, Gender and Sexuality*, New York University Press, 1999; for the 1950s–1970s, see Steve Estes, *I am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement*, University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

3. Robyn C. Spencer, in her recent study of the Black Panther Party (BPP) in Oakland, details the intensity of the FBI's COINTELPRO disruption of the BPP. In particular, the FBI fomented animosity and distrust between Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver during the early years of Cleaver's exile in Algeria. Between 1969 and 1971, while the BPP leaders campaigned for Huey's Newton's release from prison, the FBI combined their concern over the internationalization of the Panthers' support and the formation of Panther chapters across Europe with their on-going determination to shatter the organization through internal disputes. The difficulty of having Cleaver in exile in North Africa and Newton in jail made circumstances ripe for the agency's counter intelligence infiltration and subversion. Falsified letters to and from Cleaver, Newton, and key associates liaising between the International Office (i.e. Cleaver's base in Algiers) and Oakland headquarters ultimately ended in expulsions from the party, the formation of a major split faction, and murders of key party activists in California and in the New York area. See Robyn Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland,* Duke University Press, 2016.

4. See Miller, pages 3-5. But, before reading much else, read Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, Nation Books, 2016. On the trade in slaves see Sasha Turner's new book *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica,* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017 as well as Turner's essay "The Invisible Threads of Gender, Race and Slavery," *Black Perspectives*, April 13, 2017. See also Kathleen M. Brown, "Strength of the Lion … Arms Like Polished Iron: Embodying Black Masculinity in an Age of Propertied Manhood," in *New Men: Manhood in Early America*, ed. Thomas Foster, New York University Press, 2011, and Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender and in New World Slavery*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. For the context of white southern poverty see Keri Leigh Merritt's recent book *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the American South,* Cambridge University Press, 2017.

5. For a history of race in the American South framed within the history and politics of the senses, see Mark M. Smith *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation and the Senses*, University of North Carolina Press, 2006. On the emergence of "black power" politics and strategies, see Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power*, Henry Holt, 2007 and his Dark Days, Bright Nights: From *Black Power to Barack Obama*, Civitas Books, 2013.

6. On the repression and control of black men by means of lynching and its threat, see Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart E. Tolnay, *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence*, University of North Carolina Press, 2015 and Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America*, 1890–1940, University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

7. For a discussion of Panther style as connected to the development of "soul style" as it manifested among African American students on college campuses, see Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style and the Global Politics of Soul*, University of North Carolina Press, 2015, especially pages 98-101.

8. Carton 11, folder 5, Eldridge Cleaver Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. I thank Dr. Justin Gifford, currently working on a biography of Cleaver, for providing me with this reference while we sat together in a Berkeley bar after meeting in the Bancroft Library this past summer 2017, realizing we were both accessing Cleaver boxes.

9. "Eldridge Cleaver as Rebellious Pants Designer" by Mary Blume, *International Herald Tribune*, Thursday August 14, 1975.

10. For a scholarly study of the rise of unisex clothing in the 1960s and 1970s, see Jo B. Paoletti, *Sex and Unisex: Fashion, Feminism, and the Sexual Revolution*, Indiana University Press, 2015.

11. For a discussion of the returned and direct gaze in relation to black bodies and subjectivities, in particular the Black Panthers, see Cheddie. On black portraiture I will cite here, though I cannot afford to buy it and read it, Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture*, University of Chicago Press, 2009.

12. For an analysis of regimes of correction and surveillance applied to bodies and clothing, see Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*, Duke University Press, 2014.

13. In an interview in "Dazed," Robert Mapplethorpe's biographer Patricia Morrisroe comments on Mapplethorpe's racism that she refers to in her biography of him. Morrisroe says "I can't look at the pictures without reflecting on the backstory, which is not a pretty one. Milton Moore … was perhaps the great love of his life but he considered him a 'primitive.' Moore once said, 'I think he saw me like a monkey in the zoo.'" http://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/19356/1/mapplethorpe-me. Accessed Tuesday, November 28, 2017, 3:19 PM. The Mapplethorpe Foundation noted, in correspondence with me, that "it was Milton Moore's wish that his face not be shown in nude or suggestive photographs of himself. ... There exist several images of Moore's face and entire clothed body."

14. On the depiction of African American men in white gay porn, see Jesus G. Smith and Aurolyn Luykx, "Race Play in BDSM Porn: The Eroticization of Oppression," *Porn Studies*, volume 4, issue 4, 2017, 433-46. This article is useful for its specific content but also for the references made by the authors to a larger literature on race and porn. See also Louis Chude-Sukei, et al., "Race, Pornography, and Desire: A TBS Roundtable," *The Black Scholar,* volume 46, issue 4, October 2016, 49-64. The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of important arguments about race and racism within white-dominated American gay culture, the gay art scene, and gay politics by black gay authors and filmmakers. The work of Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, and Joseph Beam spoke to the experiences they shared with other black gay men during a decade of increased success for African American writers and artists and simultaneous devastation wrought by HIV and AIDS.

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