

**Everything
That Rises**

**Thinking
About Design
in Precarious
Times**

Exploring style on the carceral inside, wherein clothing functions as a site of negotiation for symbolic ownership over the body. Featuring the Nelson Mandela Rules, underwear, and Lamont, an artist.

Argument

Within an American penal system intending to remove individuality through the enforcement of uniformity, incarcerated individuals' clothing in fact functions as a site of negotiation, on which articulations of identity and institution combat, push-pull, and give-take symbolic ownership of the body.

Critical Structure

My research project situates its observations within the divisions and the overlaps of institutionally, interpersonally, and individually sanctioned self-design. Thus, the first level of operations in which clothing-related meaning may occur is institutional, wherein the institution's policies, bureaucracies, industrial relationships, and formal allowances affect one's relationship to and with their embodied uniform.¹

1. Em-bodied "Em-bodied" is a key term I have constructed to understand the unique relationship of bodies to their worn clothing in the carceral setting. While "embody" means to physicalize the soul or some other intangible concept in tangible form, em-body means to meta-physicalize an already tangible object into or onto the body, thus creating, in essence or in spirit, a singularity of body and object.

2. Rule 19, under "Clothing and Bedding" in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (1957), which, since its revision in 2015, is known simply as the Nelson Mandela Rules, states:

Every prisoner who is not allowed to wear his own clothing shall be provided with an outfit of clothing suitable for the climate and adequate to keep him in good health. Such clothing shall in no manner be degrading or humiliating.

EB: You have green boxers. That's just the color they are. They look like a highlighter green.

Me: Everyone wears them?

EB: Everyone. They're very scratchy. The fabric is, like, a material that's super thin polyester. It's very uncomfortable. You feel like you're wearing a trash bag of underwear. And the crotches on them are the worst part. The crotches are not long. They don't go up far enough. So you have a seam up front in the middle, pulling up. It's horrible.

A Choice Sartorial Snippet, in Three Chapters

I.

Artist Lamont Mathieu was prone to making sartorial decisions that did not quite align with the way he self-designed on the outside. While others forewent their individual style as a tactic for anonymity-as-self-preservation, Lamont self-preserved by creating a sartorial persona for himself that would help him stand out. "My flag was a white flag," he says. "I didn't wear red, blue or black. I wore white. For peace. I went neutral." These "flags" were bandanas, sartorial social signals that he says were brandished by the populations across the five facilities in which he served out his sentence (located in Texas, Arkansas, Kansas, Mississippi, and California, chronologically). Sometimes, these were makeshift bandanas, constructed from other pieces of clothing or from cafeteria linens, catalog-ordered art materials, or other sourceable fabrics. Lamont

found that his explicit marker of non-affiliation (no one else, he says, used a white bandana) granted him security. The gangs knew he wasn't interested in getting involved with them, and the guards knew he was not a troublemaker. This is why, he says, he was able to get away with his most notable mode of sartorial self-design: his painted uniform.

II.

"I don't want to look like everybody else," Lamont remembers thinking. "I wanted to be different." At each facility he passed through, he would polka-dot, graffiti, or otherwise color-up his uniform with acrylic paints, which he could order through the commissary or the product catalogs. He was "infamous," as he calls it, "in the prison system for writing and drawing on" his clothes. Beyond not wanting to look like the sea of khaki-wearers around him, his motivation for the artsiness was manifold. "I knew one day that I wasn't ever going to go back," he says of prison. "But I wanted them to remember me... It's about sending a message." It was about his legacy, his legacy in the system. He spent a decade in it, and he hoped never to return to it. But he appreciated the popularity of being the "different" guy; he appreciated the attention paid to him. And that was something he intended to leave the system with, as a sort of personal legacy: that recollection

of the literally colorful character, who'd done time in the south and on the west coast and beyond.

The intention of legacy-making was in part long-lasting, but also in part momentary. "In prison, dudes have to act a certain type of way. Not cool, [but] serious. Just always serious. Not for themselves, but just because the next man's watching," Lamont says. "[If] I'm always being watched, I just felt like, shit, I'm going to give them the best show I can." But he never would've self-designed with such a performative streak on the outside. Then, and now, he's much more casual, much more sartorially contained. But on the inside, this was a recuperative exercise of self-design that felt necessary to him. "I didn't want to die out in spirit," he describes. "I didn't want to get bitter in spirit."

III.

Sometimes sartorial self-design in prison or jail really isn't about interactions with authority or the larger system. Sometimes, like Lamont expressed, sartorial self-design through the uniform may be an incredibly introspective process. And it may be experienced as comfortable, wherein the embodiment of sanctioned clothing feels safe to subvert. Alternatively, it may feel safer to wear the same thing every day, which may allow an incarcerated citizen to self-reflect without the distraction of sartorial decision-making.

And yet, conversely, abdicating sartorial choice may bar an incarcerated citizen from really feeling like themselves.

These examples of people's individually influenced relationships to their penal uniforms have been supported by many interviews throughout my research process. They offer merely a glimpse into the myriad ways people engage with and relate to clothing in prison or jail—however, they are telling of the supplementary, compensatory, adversarial, or even consciously submissive tactics that many incarcerated citizens employ in order to feel more comfortable under the constraints of the carceral system, and under the authority of its sartorial mechanisms of discipline. The maneuverings, manipulations, and expressions of creativity revealed through incarcerated or formerly incarcerated citizens' stories can grant us one access point to individuals' relationships to the penal system at large, as well as the cruciality of dress in relationship to identity, and the inextinguishable nature of the human spirit to communicate itself through sartorial codes.