

Fashion Education

The Systemic Revolution

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1

Blackness in Fashion Education

Krys Osei

Genesis

The beauty that resides in and animates the determination to live free, the beauty that propels the experiments into living otherwise. It encompasses the extraordinary and mundane, art and everyday use. Beauty is not a luxury; rather it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence, an embrace of our terribleness, a transfiguration of the given. It is a will to adorn, a proclivity of the baroque, and the love of too much.

(Hartman 2019: 3)

Beauty provides the template for my existence. It is a luscious imaginative dream-
scape that offers solace in a world that was not built to accommodate my pres-
ence (Hartman 2019). As a young Black girl who grew up in the Washington,
DC metropolitan area, born to a Ghanaian father and a Cameroonian mother,
the curation of my aesthetic presentation was fashioned by two of my favour-
ite artists and their transcendent music video catalogues. Whether it was the
soul-tingling gospel poetics of Mariah Carey's flawless *Butterfly* album or bask-
ing in Missy Elliott's futuristic delight and iconography in *The Rain (Supa Dupa
Fly)*, my journey of being and becoming was rooted in their audiovisual portraits
of womanhood, as I made sense of the world and wove a tapestry of belonging
through their discographies. As an adult, my love for Mariah Carey and Missy
Elliott still runs deep. Even now, there are certainly moments when I wrestle with
how significantly commercial aesthetics have shaped the contours of my exist-
ence. It is a laborious undertaking to push beyond the confines of its trivialized
and superfluous subjection, as the master narrative of beauty relentlessly criti-
cizes my (and other Black women's) desire for beautification, reducing the essence
of such embodied intergenerational practices to mindless – if not immoral –
conspicuous consumption (Hernandez 2020).

I am writing this piece in the final year of my Ph.D. at Goldsmiths, University of London, and as a fashion educator at two creative arts and design colleges that are part of the University of the Arts London: Central Saint Martins (CSM) and London College of Fashion. I actively dedicate my self-reflexive intellectual labour to mapping geographies of how diasporic Ghanaian women in London, Accra and Washington, DC use glamour, fashion, and self-styling practices to cultivate beauty in their lives while faced with brutality (Hartman 2019: 32). Although purpose, charisma and whimsical joy animate this experimental scholarship that harvests memory from material objects and divests from conventional paradigms of knowledge production, I am often stifled by the everyday ricochet of violence that envelopes my existence and the lives of Black people in different parts of the world. Tethering these words together in May 2020, the relentless spectacle of the Black death plays on loop at whirlwind speed like a collective circuit of unimaginable grief. In tandem with the destabilizing effects of a global pandemic, which has magnified inequalities and disproportionately claimed the lives of Black people, writing this contribution is no easy feat. Yet, the trajectory of calculated assault on Black lives is nothing new. Instead, the systemic devaluation of our lives, this ‘pervasive climate of anti-Blackness’ (Sharpe 2016: 106), is part and parcel of the white supremacist organizing principles of the world. Engineered by what Black feminist literary scholar Saidiya Hartman (2007: 7) refers to as the afterlife of enslavement as ‘a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago’. Hartman shows beyond doubt how the afterlife of enslavement manifests its wrath through ‘skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment’ (Hartman 2007: 6).

And still somehow, I remain propelled by hope through the pockets of rebellion that sprout and build an archival presence of otherwise – propelled by the innovation and ingenuity of our collective self-preservation and how the synco-pated rhythms of Black futurity (Campt 2017: 2019) incubate the lineage and legacy of our cultural expression. Propelled by the Black imagination that dares to hold on tight to the transformative, yet fleeting, moments of joy and beauty that unhinge us from the brutal dispossession and harm that we continue to endure in our inhabited geo-cultural settings. Although my tethered desire for beauty and fashion cannot rectify these relentless state-sanctioned atrocities, it does carve out crucial moments of reprieve that are vital to surviving the friction of interlocked oppressive frameworks – both in my personal life and within the context of my role as a fashion educator.

I fought through a suffocating battle of enclosure while teaching conventional Media Studies during the 2017-18 academic year as a graduate teaching assistant in the Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies

at Goldsmiths, University of London. In conjunction with my Ph.D. studies, I pursued teaching at the undergraduate level to gain the necessary experience and pedagogic guidance and to assemble the diasporic Ghanaian beauty archives. I wanted to know if a traditional learning environment would effectively receive my transatlantic mixed method and world-making approach. While I did not have the opportunity to deliver lectures in this entry-level position, I was encouraged to incorporate my research on geographies of Black fashion cultural heritage in seminars to generate student debates concerning the relationship between the sociopolitical construction of identity through popular culture. Week by week, I was met with heated sparks of resistance from white students who were uninterested, if not repulsed, by the idea of validating fashion as an everyday ‘incubator of possibilities’ (Hartman 2019: 348). Week by week, I was met with hostile opposition to entertain foundational discussions about fashion’s unique vantage point in tethering threads of belonging in cross-cultural diasporic visual communication beyond material consumption. Week by week, my frustrations abounded with the rigid barriers of the enclosure from a conventional Media Studies year group writing off fashion as a minor figure, a deficient power structure that is exclusively to blame for the ongoing ecological crisis, and an optical machine that wreaks unforgivable havoc on human self-esteem.

On the one hand, I applaud my seminar students for remaining steadfast in their valid critiques of the fashion system and its detrimental impact, inextricably tied to capitalist modes of destruction that shapeshift across time and space. However, their rapid-fire teardowns were void of openness and alarmingly failed to grasp the multiplicity of truth that marks the vitality of Black cultural identity and diaspora (Hall 1990). Their persistent inability to engage in rich and generative conversations about the dynamics between fashion, race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexuality and cultural geography flattened the capacity to facilitate a horizontal pedagogic space that recognizes beauty as the antidote to violence in the lives of Black folks who ‘create life and make bare need into an arena of elaboration’ (Hartman 2019: 6). Their holistic disillusionment with centring fashion as a communal dreamscape circuit; a toolkit for people to author themselves into the world, levitating into the possibility of personhood that no longer is defined by the social space in which they have been placed (Tulloch 2016; Hall 2016) was lost in total rejection. This underappreciated quiet material revolution in the lives of Black folks showcased an inability for students to read between the lines, as their prescriptive gaze of what constitutes revolutionary ideals was unable to reconfigure fashion as a political tool of (de)construction and (re)configuration in the survival and imagination of the African diaspora (Tulloch 2016). There were no luscious dreamscapes of beauty and imagination to be found within this claustrophobic

ring of the enclosure; a bizarre teaching experience that taught me the power of standing firm in my convictions. As a Black woman scholar and educator, I refuse to be riddled with shame in dispensing beauty and fashion as my executive assistants to rewrite the terms of what is possible, to improvise and outwardly challenge the social and political construction of my identity that is sentenced to dwell in a looming house of servitude and bondage in whatever direction I travel (Hartman 2019: 228). Aesthetics and self-styling – in theory and embodied practice – make up my quintessential toolkit to birth freedom against the waves of totalizing pillage and destruction; such is ‘the untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive’ (Hartman 2019: 228).

Central Saint Martins: Resuscitating beauty from enclosure

The terms of teaching within a traditional Media Studies context were fixed with little to no room for flexible dialogue that detracted from essentializing the field of critical beauty and Fashion Studies. As I sit and reflect on the volatile and emotionally taxing encounter as a seminar leader at Goldsmiths, perhaps my expectations from students were misguided while teaching in a university where a fashion concentration is not offered. Redirecting my specialist knowledge and teaching efforts to a notable fashion education institution, Central Saint Martins, was a necessary manoeuvre that offered a refreshing learning atmosphere where fashion and creative arts degree programmes are the focal point of the student experience. It was riveting to join CSM in September 2018 as an associate lecturer in Cultural Studies for the Fashion, Textiles and Jewellery Programme. The moments I cherish forever are rooted in becoming a dissertation supervisor for a majority Black British student cohort completing their final year on various Fashion Design and Communication Pathways. The culmination of my story at CSM is about excavating documentation from nowhere, about breathing life into an archive that descended from somewhere. It is a collaborative story about generating beauty from a two-fold sense of enclosure. It is a story about a horizontal pedagogic practice that recognizes teachers and students as co-curators of freedom (hooks 2003). Together, we move with the audacious spirit that orchestrates a resounding chorus of Blackness at CSM, effectively holding space for current Black fashion students and the cohort of Black graduates that once occupied the corridors before them. Collectively, we have birthed a space of communion that will serve as more than a footnote in the master repository of fashion’s cultural history.

I was giddy and intrigued two weeks before the first round of face-to-face meetings with my dissertation students in October 2018. Simply reading through their various fashion degree pathways caused a wave of exhilaration: Fashion

Communication and Promotion, Fashion Journalism, Fashion Design with Marketing, Fashion Knit, Fashion Womenswear and Fashion Menswear. As I continued to scroll through the proposals with delight, their working abstract descriptions stopped me in my tracks. From Humane Afrofuturism, to Caribbean migration transfiguring Black British beauty narratives; to an interrogation of the Americanization and fetishization of Black masculinity in contemporary British popular culture; to the systemic whitewashing and commodification of sustainability in high and fast-fashion; to inventive Black British sonic epistemologies of transcendence through sound and sociality in London through the work of director Jenn Nkiru; to a self-reflective photo-essay dismantling colourism and ethnic hierarchies in Peru through fashion, art, sexuality and religion; to a cross-cultural examination of intergenerational African diasporic visual communication through Black British fashion designers, Grace Wales Bonner and Mowalola Ogunlesi, and African American visual artists, Kerry James Marshall and Faith Ringgold – I was awe inspired and deeply moved by my soon-to-be students and their critical engagement with beauty, fashion and aesthetics as incubators of possibilities, ‘*yielding a thousand new forms and improvisations*’ (Hartman 2019: 230, original emphasis) to contextualize cultural geographies of Blackness in motion.

Inhale, exhale, repeat

I smiled ear to ear in my southeast London flat that evening and processed the forthcoming energized reintroduction to teaching. Inklings of hope were set on autopilot for the next two weeks as I eagerly awaited to concretize what already appeared to be a transformative teaching experience on paper. Thursday, 11 October 2018, marked the first day of my dissertation tutorials and the onset of my career at CSM. The time on my vintage gold-tone Casio watch read 10:23a.m. when I noticed the abstract echo of bustling footsteps alongside group chatter ricocheting from the adjacent corridor into my booked tutorial room, D122. A handful of final-year Black fashion students peeped their heads into the space on a mission to verify that I was indeed a Black woman. An awkward five-second pause became a symphony of laughter unleashed by our disoriented amusement. The kind of inimitable laughter that possesses your entire body. The kind of laughter that unleashes a reservoir of tears. The kind of laughter that erupts from the deepest wells of sadness and blossoms into immeasurable zeal. This laughter was the kind that brings you back to life after you have died from a thousand heart-breaks within the circle of enclosure and have now located sanctuary in communal endurance – you see, ‘inside the circle it is clear that every song is really the same song, but crooned in infinite variety, every story altered and unchanging: *How can I live? I want to be free. Hold on*’ (Hartman 2019: 349, original emphasis).

Our two-fold inventory of suffering on the margins as teacher and student was catalogued on that inaugural day of dissertation tutorials and updated in the following months. Yes, I was ushered to the forefront of representation for my students. Still, I welcomed it with open arms following the scolding anti-fashion brigade of white students I faced weekly within a conventional Media Studies environment in the prior academic year. It was fabulous to no longer feel like an academic outcast. It was a beautiful and collaborative undertaking that satisfied our joint appetite for interactive dialogue – with a Black fashion scholar-educator and Black fashion students unearthing a rarity of intellectual counselling in the enclosure of British academia. Free from razor-sharp stares of contempt and whiteness doubting our capacity to teach and learn, we were each other's mirror, an overdue reflection saturated with the cultural competence to co-curate a moving portrait of freedom.

In the transcript below, two of my former dissertation students graciously reflect on their experiences at CSM – Rhea Dillion (she/they) is an interdisciplinary artist who graduated from the BA Fashion Communications and Promotion Programme, and Kacion Mayers (he/him), a fashion journalist, graduated from the BA Fashion Journalism Programme. They reflect on me as their supervisor and the multi-layered anti-Black racism they faced within the imperial enclosure of CSM.

KACION: I had students that literally compared me to a slave when I was a student at Central Saint Martins, literally [...] white students joking about comparing me to a slave [...], and no one said a thing. It was a roller coaster; it was intense. Going into that space as a Black student, you must really know yourself. If you don't, [CSM] can really play with you. There were instances where I could have just questioned myself until the point where I crumbled. I worked through a lot of imposter syndrome. CSM was a completely bizarre world that was new, and I welcomed it, but there was also this friction of never completely belonging. I always felt a bit uncomfortable in terms of how people would perceive me, or I was always very conscious of how I would come across, no matter what, you know? I thought that there was always a special or different kind of perception when I did things in comparison to students that weren't Black. It was so, so wild.

RHEA: So wild! And actually, going through this process of reflection, we're both now able to contextualize and find the language for the treatment that we experienced. I realized the other day that I was bullied for a period of time with people in my class. That's wild. I've had friends say to me, coming to apologize on the behalf of other people [...] being like: 'By the way, how you were treated for this period of time wasn't cool, and I just wanted to say

something about it'. And I'm like, wow, thank you... you know? I hadn't even found the language for the treatment I received that was so ...

KRYS: Normal?

RHEA: Yeah, super normal [because we were studying fashion], but it also feeds into racist tropes because white students are able to talk freely, while I'm expected to be able to fend for myself in any space because I'm the tough darker-skinned girl who has carried the weight of the world since eternity and it's disgusting. The entire teaching philosophy at CSM is to really break you down and then build you back up ... but it was very much more apparent that Blackness (and I guess we'll say a non-whiteness) was really in charge of its own rebuilding. I really do think that there were so many more ways the university could have assisted with our process of rebuilding.

KRYS: I cannot deny the emotional shock after meeting a group of you before my first official [dissertation] tutorial. It was hilarious, terrifying, magical – all the mixed bag of feels when you know something is going to be a moment [...] a life-altering encounter to cherish for years to come. I do have to say that at that moment, I instantly felt the need to be inadvertently tied to CSM for the foreseeable future, even though it was literally my first day on the job [group laughter].

RHEA: Oh my God, I feel like we scared you! Because I swear Kacion had his dissertation meeting first and came to tell me all about it, and I was like: 'No way!' I was really excited to have a Black woman, yeah. And then it all got around to the other Black students, and we were like: 'Oh my God!!' It was so wild [...] you were the first teacher that was a Black person, let alone a Black woman, that I had for a sustained period of time.

KRYS: And did you feel that it was easier to talk through your dissertation themes with me? In terms of not having to explain your Blackness and/or the reasons you choose to equally platform race, gender and queerness into your writing and creative practice?

RHEA: Yeah, of course. It was also a form of counselling, you know? [Laughter] There's no question about the importance of having you in our final year. I think when you've gotten to the final year of university, we've finally figured out who we are and what we're about [...] and it was helpful to have those conversations beyond the theoretical level of the dissertation

by talking to someone who understood us. Like, finally, you know? I don't know [...] we shouldn't have even had to wait for that long. But since we did, the final year was definitely the best time to have your input, support and guidance.

KACION: The best quote I've ever read concerning the argument of representation is by Junot Diaz. This is paraphrasing because I can't remember exactly what he says, but it's something along the lines of: If you look in the mirror and you don't see your reflection, it's almost like you're a vampire, you're a monster, and when you do see a reflection it's like you become human again (Stetler 2009). I do exist, we do exist, and we are not monsters hidden in the shadows somewhere and can't come out in the daytime. We need to see ourselves, and white students take that for granted because they always see themselves. It's vital because a lot of our work is very personal and self-reflective – it was such an important experience. So major. But despite it all, CSM has shaped me; it made me. It broke me down and put me back together again completely. That school [...] switched the way I thought about things and completely flipped the way I approach things. It made me a lot more open. It made me question a lot of good and bad things. It was necessary. In order to be where I am today, it was necessary.

I sit back and process the parallel, yet contradictory, worlds of enclosure that fostered our gravitation to build a community space as dissertation supervisor and dissertation student. I entered the walls of CSM in October 2018 urgently seeking to escape the frustrating tensions that ensued from having to conceal fashion as the centrepiece of my life for the sake of surviving within a university department dominated by whiteness, masculinity, and age-old existing paradigms that were incompatible to bring both my thesis to life, alongside effective pedagogic practice led by matters of the heart (Hall 1990: 223). With swift abruptness, my body had reached its cutoff point where it could no longer inhabit the violence of being made to obscure an essential part of my everyday life. Self-fashioning is a necessary, daily sensory aesthetic experience in which the materiality of textures, silhouettes and fabrics that glimmer with the spectacle of adornment tend to the ruptured complexities that encompass my past, present and future diasporic existence as a Black woman. At CSM, I shed the deadweight of feeling like an academic outcast from the eternal validation of fashion education. Within lectures and seminars, I could openly teach how postcolonial fashion narratives catapult themselves into the political sphere, reckoning with the horrors of colonialism and intergenerational memories of geographic violence. My transcendent dissertation experience of supervising students who mirrored my reflection was boosted

by the freedom to encourage cohorts of fashion students to think more expansively about Black identity. It has been truly rewarding to expose these curious minds, whose curriculum design is rooted in the Eurocentric canon of visuality, to the dynamic tapestry of Black diasporic fashion systems and aesthetics. From Windhoek, Namibia, to Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, to Accra and Ghana, I remain delighted and fulfilled at the immeasurable impact of teaching transnational cultural geographies of fashion, which break open new pathways for understanding the beauty of dispossessed communities that refuse Blackness as a monolith and the centuries-old tales of inferiority that populate the consciousness of fashion education.

Building the archive: Thinking through cultural expression

Becoming a fashion educator at CSM has allowed me to flourish personally and professionally. I write these contemplations no longer as an associate lecturer but as a full-time faculty member at the University of the Arts London – with my position divided between lecturer of Cultural Studies at CSM and practitioner in Fashion Media Production at the London College of Fashion. Within British academic universities, it is abnormal for Black women to hold a job with such security. The vast majority of Black women struggle to navigate the whiplash of precarity through the cycles of hourly paid fixed-term contracts that are unclear about career advancement opportunities. As an associate lecturer, I exchanged this raincloud of uncertainty by remaining present in the heartfelt resonance and the knowledge exchanged between my Black dissertation students and me. I teamed up with Rhea Dillion and Kacion Mayers to assemble our incubator of possibilities before their time at CSM closed as 2019 graduates (while my endpoint also loomed in the balance).

This incubator came to life as a labour of love – a passion project woven together through a series of conversations devising ways to improve the Black student experience at CSM. After reporting the racial violence experienced by my students to senior management, there was an outpour of support for my advancement to assume the role of academic lead for the initiative. Funded by the programme director for fashion and the associate dean of student experience and enhancement, *Building the Archive: Thinking through Cultural Expression (BTA)* was born in the summer of 2019. As a collective, we platform Black creative practitioners and their contributions to visual culture, often overlooked and under-acknowledged in arts and design higher education. With a specific focus on Black CSM graduates, we are establishing a lineage of Black past, present and future that healthily challenges the colonial constructs of fashion education. We encourage students through engagement with personal examples of career

success in the creative arts while widening students' knowledge of contemporary legacies of Black cultural expression. We are not seeking to actively disrupt the notion of the university as a safe space; instead, we are creating our own space that shakes the room with the audacity to tap into the pulse of the radical Black imagination, envisioning a better, more sustainable future.

The conversation within the *BTA* is about the futurity of Blackness at CSM. At the same time, it pays homage to those who have survived and continue to survive under the western governance of the university landscape. This incubator of possibilities pays respect to those who have had the boldness to craft exquisite beauty while working against engrained oppression systems that manifests in the air we breathe. We have existed and will continue to exist, sharing the energy and spirituality that ensues by constructing our own portrait of fashion education that ruptures the master narrative of whiteness. This resounding chorus of Blackness is 'a vehicle for another kind of story [...] an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise' (Hartman 2019: 348).

KACION: It's really difficult to locate these histories with the Black student population at Central Saint Martins [...] we're still struggling to establish that repository of Black students. And it's like, why? You can all look up to Galliano; you can all look up to all these other alumni and everyone else [...] all the way back to before CSM was even called CSM, before the school became part of University of the Arts London. It's interesting that you can locate that documentation from all the way back, but to search for one Black student from the 1980s, it's like: 'Oooof [...] hmm ... let me get back to you in two weeks with that' [laughter]. But why? Why is that?

The inaugural *BTA* conversation took place on Wednesday, 20 November 2019. Osei Bonsu, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art of Africa at Tate Modern, graced us with his presence to discuss his journey into creatively embracing his Welsh and Ghanaian cultural heritage, his artistic inspirations and his motivations. After the reception at the King's Cross site, I was astonished to learn this was the first time Osei was invited to speak about his extensive career as a London and Paris-based programmer, cultural critic and art historian since he graduated from CSM with a BA in Culture, Criticism and Curation in 2013.

KACION: Osei is literally heading up the Tate [...], redefining the museum experience! And yet, we don't appear to have any Black role models that are invited to come back to speak about their success stories. It's always white students or white people in the industry. And don't get me wrong [...] that engagement is still inspirational, but we do need to see ourselves.

RHEA: Bringing our voices together was nothing short of magical, and the tone that was set with Osei was liberating. It's funny because we thought Osei would be more reserved because of the Tate Modern and it being another colonial institution, but he was just so open and happy to be in the space of community, which is what we had hoped for anyone that is invited to speak. It was really magical how naturally all of our voices came together so perfectly to facilitate that.

Black students filled the room to capacity and intently listened as Osei delivered an energized discussion about the healing power of creating a community with other Black students – just as he did with Ibrahim Kamara, the Sierra Leonean stylist, former Senior Editor at Large at i-D Magazine, and current Editor-in-Chief of Dazed Magazine. He delved into the importance of following your intuition and taking advantage of student resources to minimize the expensive cost of materials. Furthermore, he passionately unearthed his greatest rewards and challenges in the whitewashed curation profession. Our second *BTA* conversation occurred on Wednesday, 26 February 2020, with the charismatic British-Ghanaian multidisciplinary artist, photographer and filmmaker Campbell Addy, who graduated in 2016 with BA in Fashion, Communication and Promotion. In line with sentiments expressed by Osei in November, Campbell also voiced an interest in being more engaged with CSM to dismantle the hierarchy of gatekeeping in the industry. Jessica Gianelli (she/her), a Caribbean American student from New York City in the MA Fashion Image programme, heartwarmingly reflected on attending the talk with Campbell Addy and the impact of seeing him front and centre stage as one of CSM's iconic success stories (Figures 1.1–1.3).

JESSICA: I knew who Campbell was, but growing up in the US, with a Caribbean background [...] there was always a stigma around what Black people can and can't do, especially in terms of school and career – the traditional idea of being a doctor or a lawyer, etc. It was so motivating to hear about the similarities with him growing up in a Ghanaian family [...] wanting to pursue photography and working in fashion. Seeing Campbell there, like actually seeing him in person [...] because yeah, you see stuff on the internet, but seeing him there [...], he seemed like such a super normal guy [laughter] in comparison to other practitioners that I've seen talk. He was so open and down-to-earth, and it made me feel like of course, I can do it too. You know what I mean? And just to be in the room full of people that were like me as well was really comforting. I don't think I had ever sought out a space in London that was for Black creatives, but being there felt really, really inspiring to see what he does and the raw



FIGURE 1.1: Group of students seated listening to Campbell Addy, 2020. Courtesy of photographer Caleb Azumah Nelson.

honesty he brought by talking about the difficulties of attending CSM, the racism he's fought through to get to where he is...the experience was incredibly empowering. I really did walk out of the door and thought to myself: Okay, I can do this too.

My beautiful and transformative experience as a fashion educator at CSM will stay with me forever. It has been a place of ascension, a culmination of gorgeous encounters with my Black dissertation students that have laid the groundwork for a pedagogic approach rooted in the spirit of 'Black aliveness, or the poetics of being' (Quashie 2021). My dissertation students from 2019 and 2020 continue to grow and pursue their creative desires, and our teaching dynamic has blossomed into meaningful friendships that expand beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom. One day we'll look back at this learning community and the students who have taken flight from the corridors of CSM. We saw how the connection created from our archive of overlooked people reinvigorated Black fashion students and filled their hearts with hope for the future.



FIGURE 1.2: CSM graduates; Rhea Dillon, Campbell Addy and Kacion Mayers, 2020. Courtesy of photographer Caleb Azumah Nelson.

As a Black woman fashion scholar and educator, I learned that experimentation and openness cultivate possibilities for more equitable learning and teaching environments. I did not embark on this journey into fashion higher education with a blueprint for establishing and developing an initiative such as *BTA*. In collaboration with Black students who gravitated towards resuscitating memories from the ruptures, silences and misconstrued narratives that obscure the multiplicity of who we are, I leaned into the essence of invention and improvisation. In March of 2021, I attended an online nonfiction writing workshop by Nadia Owusu, a Ghanaian-Armenian-American writer and urbanist, entitled ‘Healing the Body, Reimagining the World’.

She encouraged us to embrace authorship as an open-ended portal where we can revise harmful narratives into something transformative. To Black fashion educators seeking to plant seeds of optimism, I offer you this: ‘The only ground firm enough to count on is the one we write for ourselves. What would the world [of fashion education] look like if we were to illuminate the truths that have been purposefully hidden?’ (Owusu 2021: n.pag.). Guided by the urgency to shuffle the arrangements of what is possible within the confines of my authority, it must be noted that this exercise of the invention does not majestically blossom without



FIGURE 1.3: CSM graduates; Rhea Dillon, Campbell Addy and Kacion Mayers, 2020. Courtesy of photographer Caleb Azumah Nelson.

the imminent threat of discipline. But, if we understand the language of fashion as an extension of ourselves, an encryption of beauty that hosts ancestral codes of imaginative subsistence, I will remain hopeful while harvesting the tangible increments of our collective (re)imaginative and healing efforts in worldmaking.

All meaningful love relations empower each person engaged in the mutual practice of partnership. Between teacher and student love makes recognition possible; it offers a place where the intersection of academic striving meets the overall striving to be psychologically whole.

(hooks 2003: 136)

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