

**Beneath: *Deep Roots, Long Extensions***

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Throughout history, clothing has served as a layer of protection from environmental elements, distinction between one's gender as well as one's class. The same holds true today, the only difference being the expansion of fashion trends make it a million dollar business and there is an increased focus on the expression of one's personal identity. It has evolved into a tool of communication, allowing wearers to literally express their ideals on their sleeve. I would like to create conversation between the wearer and the garment opposed to the garment communicating solely with onlookers. On the other hand, I do not want to exclude the onlookers, but rather create more dimensions to the conversation by incorporating a third voice. Intimately tucked away on the interior of the garment, this voice is seen and only heard by the wearer.

The notion of having hidden messages within the garment is the basis of my women's streetwear clothing line, *Beneath*. The line urges the wearers to be themselves while disregarding outer misconceptions

and judgments. The garments in the collection range from classy to casual, and incorporate a sense of style that reflects an urban and Caribbean blend, which is a direct reflection of my identity; being that I was born in the United States and have parents who are from Jamaica. The collection consists of t-shirts, as well as double-breasted jackets, and is targeted towards a relatively young female audience. Drawing from the African Diaspora as well as Caribbean cultural references, the collection aims to educate and include, rather than exclude others. It is rightfully named *Deep Roots, Long Extensions* which describes the African Diaspora as well as the versatility of African hair.

The conversations I propose in this collection revolve around the empowerment of individuals through pride and confidence. I looked at the style of clothing and the way people carried themselves in films like *Rockers*, *Heartland Reggae*, and *Miss Lou & Friends*. Within all of those films, there is a strong sense of pride, which I try to capture in the collection by depicting aspects of Caribbean culture. There are references to key historical figures like Marcus Garvey, Nanny of the Maroons, and Maya Angelou; while using patterns derived from Ghana and Nigeria, in addition to bright colors reminiscent of the Caribbean. Some of the garments have a slight military aesthetic, which help to demand a sense of authority, in turn instilling confidence within the wearer. I merge this aesthetic with the concept of the garment being the



Mash it Up Jacket

third voice by appropriately having some of the hidden messages in patois, a Jamaican dialect. For example, the interior of one of the garments reads, "STOP sky larking & MASH UP di competition." This can be translated to mean, "STOP day dreaming and destroy your competition," which essentially aims to press the wearer to stop procrastinating. The messages are meant to inspire and educate the wearer whether it's on something as small as procrastination, or as important as slavery.

A t-shirt in the collection has 'BLK STR LNE' printed on the front, making a subtle reference to Marcus Garvey's 1919 shipping line called the Black Star Line. The inside of the garment has background information about Garvey and the



Garvey Shirt

shipping line in case the wearer is not familiar with the reference. The line was intended to transport goods to African countries and sought to reestablish African Americans back to their homeland. This was key in sparking what is known today as the 'Back to Africa' movement. At Garvey's time, this type of liberation and self-pride was unseen. I reference his message, not to intentionally promote the movement, but to educate the wearer of a strong and influential historical figure, while inspiring them to pursue their own goals in the face of opposition.

I look to powerful and successful historical figures to draw inspiration and pride from because that is what helped me find myself. Essentially, the same things that I instill in the pieces motivated and empowered me at some point and time. Growing up in a predominantly white area in Maryland made it quite difficult to connect with my heritage. I could not depend on school to educate me about my Caribbean background, so I began to do research myself. There is a fascinating history within the Maroons, who are a group of people taken from Africa to Jamaica through slavery. They escaped the British plantations, formed together in the mountainous terrain, and fought against the British. Though all of the Maroons are important to remember, key figures like Accompong, Kudjoe, and Nanny emerged. Today, Nanny is one of Jamaica's National Heroes and appears on Jamaica's five hundred dollar bill. Her historical impact can be seen as one

similar to Harriet Tubman's presence in African American history. During the summer of 2006 I had the opportunity to interview the kernal (similar to a mayor) of a Maroon community in Portland, JA called Moore Town. We discussed how the Maroons still remain autonomous from the Jamaican government and continue to carry a strong sense of pride. That discus-



Nanny Mural in Moore Town



Maroon Jacket

sion allowed me to connect and learn about a portion of my past that had seemed distant. While at Moore Town, I was able to see Nanny's gravestone. There was also a tribute mural on the wall of the local school, which I later incorporated into an emblem design, which can be seen on the interior of the double-breasted Maroon jacket in the collection. The circular crest of the emblem, reads, "Moore Town, Children of

Nanny" which allows the wearer to claim allegiance to a powerful past. Similar to the Marcus Garvey shirt, I have background information in the garment to educate the wearer.

The inspiration for the Maroon jacket came about from self-discovery of my Caribbean heritage, but inspiration for the form came elsewhere. As I mentioned earlier, I drew from Ghanaian and Nigerian patterns, as well as bright yellows, purples, and oranges inspired by the Caribbean; but the form of the



Photo: [www.designermagazine.tripod.com](http://www.designermagazine.tripod.com)

Maroon Jacket

clothes are based on Western influences. The Maroon jacket in particular is a more chic and feminine version of the jackets characteristic of the Black Panthers in the 70s. I chose this basic silhouette to give the wearer presence and a sense of authority, similar to what the Panthers exuded. It is important to note that the jacket's original form was worn mainly by males. Women played a more submissive role, and the adaptation of the form is an attempt to establish the female in an empowering, authoritative role. I also drew from the 50s for inspiration for a pair of high-waisted shorts. I put a twist on the old style by creating a buttoned front panel. Keeping with *Beneath's* over-arching





concept, I have a message on the yellow backing. It is an excerpt from Maya

Diamond Shortz

Angelou's inspiring poem, *Still I Rise*, and speaks of one's confidence in their body. It reads, "Does my sexiness upset you, does it come as a surprise that I dance as if I've got diamonds at the meetings of my thighs." I played off of this text by adorning the interior with a diamond print.

While brainstorming the overall look of the collection, I kept in mind that I wanted it to have



Beneath Spring/Summer '09 Looks



27Mill Sweater

strong visual qualities in the form, graphics, and color. This graphic quality can be seen in the simplest of pieces. For example, the black sweater has an image of an Ife Nigerian bronze head that accentuates its prominent line features. These lines are then extended over the shoulder and down the back of the shirt to form a barcode at the back of the garment. The number on the barcode reads 27 million, which repre-

sents the estimated number of people who were enslaved throughout history. The barcode on the back and the dynamic artifact graphic on the front create an important juxtaposition. This signifies that even with the exploitation of a people, the African culture is still rich with pride and authenticity. In conjunction with the meaning, I feel the visual appeal is also very important. In the fashion world, people always judge a book by its cover, mainly

because there is little or no content inside upon which to judge. Or on the contrary, the content may overpower the visual appeal, making the pieces interesting conceptually, but uninteresting visually, causing it to be overlooked. In my collection, I aimed to give the wearer a well-written novel with a beautiful cover, allowing them to have the best of both worlds. The deeper meaning within the garments form an allegiance between the wearer and the clothing, allowing them to further appreciate what each piece represents as well as the detail that was put into its construction.

Why shouldn't our clothes educate and inspire us? I believe the consumer deserves clothing with content as well as visual presence. We have moved past clothing as purely function and now use it as a piece of art communicating with its audience. The garments converse with the wearer on topics as serious as slavery, and as personal as telling one to stop procrastinating. In the future, I would like to see the collection fine-tuned and mass produced in partnership with an established clothing company. In order to stay true to the strong and rich cultural references, I would keep the interior messages, helping to educate, rather than exploit the meaning of the garments. Apart from the African Diaspora, I hope to explore different themes and create more collections under the line *Beneath*, with the over-arching third voice concept.

## Work Cited

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