So Fresh so Clean

Jamil Johnson

My eighth grade Algebra teacher had a habit of mixing in her lessons with talking to my class casually about anything. Ranging from tired platitudes that every adult feels that they have to share with the youth to genuine advice on how we as young adults should view growing up.

The one thing that she explained that stuck with me is how the social hierarchy of middle school is based entirely on the quality of one’s own clothing. At the time I resented the idea that I or any of my friends were actually that petty. As I have gotten older however, I have not only realised what my teacher claimed is true, but also why it is true in Jackson, Mississippi.

I wear the clothes that I like aesthetically and feel comfortable in, which explains my penchant for buying expensive colorful shoes and tight pants. For me, my clothes are the pinnacle of physical representation not only for me, but for the culture I represent. Black Southerners, a people spread across the the entirety of the Southeast United states; we have an obsession with looking nice; Or as Outkast put it in 2000 looking “So fresh and so clean”. I don't know where our infatuation with our presentation comes from; maybe it reaches all the way back to the African Queens and Kings that every black child is told to be a descendant of or maybe we simply are making up for the time we lost as slaves, but regardless of all of that our eccentricities are really just a way for us to create a sense of pride.

Two hundred dollar belts varying from gucci, fendi, ferragamo, hermes; true religion jeans, Jordans or the comically large pairs of Patrick Ewing's are a slew of brands that I see at my high school on a daily basis worn by maybe less than 10% of my school's population. Somehow though these boys and girls probably the most visible people in the entire school. They are also the most tormented kids at my entire school. They are followed and bothered in the hallways by every principal, teacher, or administrator, that feels like bothering them. There is a stigma about just simply wearing those kind of clothes at my school.

To presume that what they wear to cover themselves the same as most everyone else makes them anything more or less as a human is the flaw in my own culture's belief surrounding dress. The value blacks put on fashion diverges from that of the rest of the world. Locally what we wear is a stigma in it of itself. Big cities, country wide, have tried to criminalize sagging pants. Police officers are taught what type of clothes to watch more closely; America can not see us because they only see what we wear. I want to be so fresh and I want to be so clean, but I don't want to suffer because of it.