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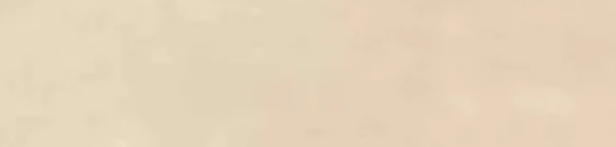
Black Beauty to the rescue for fall/winter 2026

Solutions for a better world from Angela Davis and fashion designer Natalie Belle



by MICHAEL HENRY ADAMS

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Rising designer Natalie Belle with friend and caterer, onetime super model Norma Jean Darden Credit: Michael Henry Adams photo

“Our purpose is to conjure, as a collective experience, the inherent sovereignty that exists within Black women and femmes. To us, there is no greater luxury than Freedom.” — Natalie Belle

If answered prayers can create unexpected problems, another equally important life lesson is that the unexpected is not always necessarily bad. Sometimes, something unanticipated can be wonderful.

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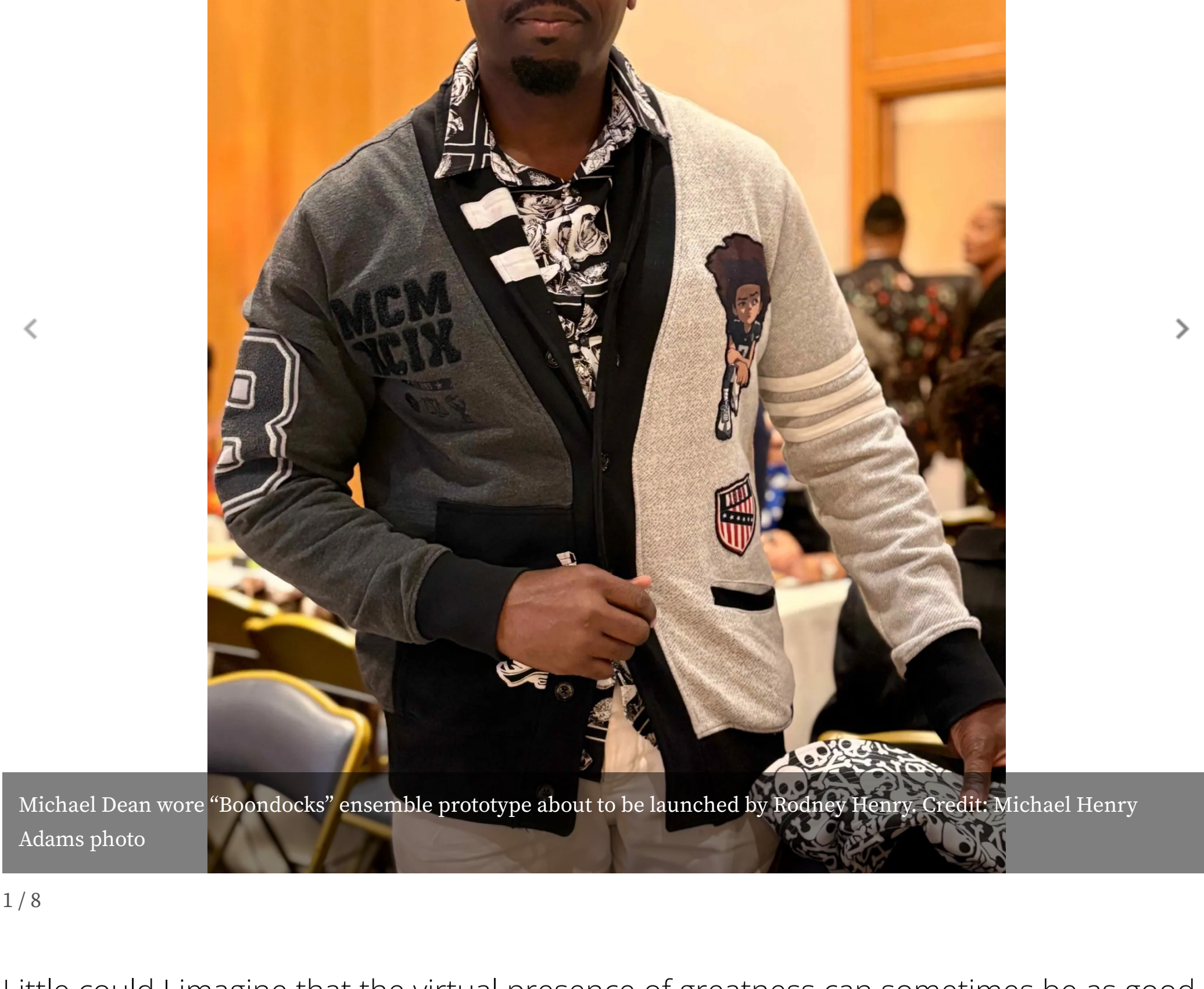
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That's how things turned out a week ago Wednesday at Natalie Belle's euphoniously named line, [Natty Belle's](#) Spring-Summer fashion week 2026 presentation, “Black Femme Sovereignty Resurrected.” Hoping to link her creativity with the energy of the ancestors, the young designer staged her showing in the open air on Summit Rock. That's just South of Seneca Village, the historic 19th-century settlement of free people of color who were displaced by the creation of Central Park and went largely uncompensated.

Attired in an array of artfully draped apparel, made from light fabrics in soft colors denoting the start of warm weather, a dozen models gracefully posed in a semicircle. Belle calls these women “muses,” and tall, short, caked, or slender, they represented various ages. For over an hour, 60 or so spectators admired, photographed, and questioned each.

Beautiful sisters in becoming, bespoke clothes is one thing, but I was also looking forward to the closing celebratory dinner, held in an apartment house facing the Hudson Downtown. Featuring a buffet of fried chicken, Louisiana-style catfish, collard greens, cornbread, macaroni and cheese, rice pilaf, and peach cobbler, it was catered by former high-fashion model Norma Jean Darden. Dinner was also to include a personal hero of mine in attendance; when I learned that Angela Davis, a still-fierce freedom fighter at 81, would only appear virtually via Zoom, at first, I was heartbroken.

Michael Henry Adams photos



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Little could I imagine that the virtual presence of greatness can sometimes be as good as, and maybe even better than, an in-person encounter. That's because many people when face-to-face with a beloved celebrity forget how to behave. There's so much competition to make a connection, some people are liable to talk over you or to interrupt. To obtain an autograph or a selfie, others might even resort to elbowing to inch closer. A Zoom visit is entirely different.

Saying how much she regretted not being at Belle's show earlier, how much she loved the mudcloth coat by Belle that she wore, Davis was every bit the gracious and insightful diva one might expect. Her remarks were adroit reflections on her Southern roots and mixed-race ancestry. With great politeness, questions were asked of her in an absolutely orderly way.

“Ms. Davis!” I inquired, when my turn came, “Just as young men sagging their trousers do today, just by the way you wore your hair, you P-Oed many, so I wonder if you might comment on the value of self-expression, through what we wear or how, becoming an act of rebellion, that defies conformity?”

“When I stopped straightening my hair in 1966, people acted as if I invented the Afrol!” she recalled, eliciting laughter. Davis said to wear her hair that way then was inviting the police to stop her. “From the very start, it was a ... decision in solidarity with those who refused to embrace the existing political and esthetic norms.” Her choice, she continued, coincided with the bumper sticker she'd put on her 1958 Buick, proclaiming, “Black is Beautiful!” “Unfortunately I finally had to remove it, to keep so many white people from trying to drive me off the freeway, to drive me off the road,” she said as we gasped. “I think it's important for young people to know that [the] assertion that Black is beautiful is ... a challenge to all authority ...”

Davis has a resonant way of speaking, elongating vowels for emphasis. Is it slightly reminiscent of Maya Angelou? Perhaps, but it is a mellifluous, rhythmic cadence that's definitely hers alone.

Touching on the importance of recalling our struggles, our history as people of African descent, she admonished us to examine the past's joyousness and triumph, as well as exploitation and setbacks. Davis was also emphatic about a shared responsibility to the future — to make common cause against violence raging anywhere, be it in Gaza, the Sudan, or at home in the U.S.

Here, as if checking herself, Davis said: “Sometimes, when we are urged to think about Black history, we confine that to the history of violence and injury that has been done to us. Much more important is the fact that Black people not only fought against that oppression, but ... we managed to produce beauty in the process of engaging in that struggle!”

A procession of ancestrally inspired clothes in Central Park, an address of encouragement from a still strong and beautiful living legend, superb food in a stylish setting — this was an evening experience all about reminding the world that Black is Beautiful no matter who asserts to the contrary. When I got the chance, over peach cobbler and champagne, you know what I asked young Natalie, only around since 2017, and like everyone else challenged by Covid: “She was wearing your coat, her involvement in your dinner elevated everything — what is your connection to Angela Davis?”

Smiling, Belle answered: “Destiny!” She explained rather modestly, “We met at a dinner party. I wasn't invited, but someone outside who knew her asked me to alert Dr. Davis. She thanked me when she returned from her friend, complaining that it was growing cooler and she needed to get a coat. ‘I have a coat!’ I said, showing her on my phone.”

I may have not said it first, but there is no saying more true: “No one should come to New York to live unless he is willing to be lucky.” — E. B. White, 1949

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