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By Frances Sola-Santiago

Hip-hop culture dominated the fashion zeitgeist in 2017. From a Louis Vuitton and Supreme collaboration to Gucci's support of Harlem designer Dapper Dan's store reopening, the fashion industry welcomed Black culture into the highest echelons of high fashion. Rapper Cardi B became the darling of New York Fashion Week in September after being rejected by designers throughout most of her career. Marc Jacobs traded the runway for the street, staging a show that included bucket hats, oversized jackets, and loads of corduroy on a large number of models of color.

But while the industry appeared to diversify by acknowledging the indomitable force of hip-hop culture, it truly didn't. The politics of hip-hop and Black culture were left out of the conversation and the players behind-the-scenes remained a homogeneous mass of privileged white Westerners. Nearly every high fashion brand this year capitalized on streetwear— a style of clothing born out of hip-hop culture in marginalized neighborhoods of New York City and Los Angeles, and none recognized the historical, cultural, and political heritage that made streetwear a worldwide phenomenon, symbolizing power and cool.

The fashion industry has a history of appropriation that obliterates the identity politics embedded in this style and calls into question the industry's ability to embrace and understand Black culture wholly.

The history of streetwear dates to the 1980s and 1990s, as documented by the film *Fresh Dressed*: the proliferation of its bright colors, typography, and prints was a product of the era's graffiti; Daniel "Dapper Dan" Day crafted pieces using high fashion logos from Gucci and Louis Vuitton logos; Cross Colours— a Los Angeles-born clothing brand— paved the way for all the streetwear designers that followed by designing pieces rooted in hip-hop culture; Sean John— the brainchild clothing line of P. Diddy— was the first streetwear brand to gain monumental success ; hip-hop artists like Tupac, Nas, P. Diddy, and LL Cool J were instrumental in bringing the urban uniform of New York City and Los Angeles to the mainstream. Today, streetwear consists of hoodies, caps, t-shirts, and sneakers, mainly designed by independent brands, such as Supreme— founded in 1994— and Bape—founded in 1993.

As hip-hop became mainstream, the genre took streetwear along with it, becoming a worldwide sensation to sneakerheads, people who collect sneakers, and hype beasts, people

who collect clothing, and accessories to show off. Yet, for all hip-hop's contributions to fashion, the industry has alienated it, only choosing to give streetwear a try when it's been trendy to be Black, a phenomenon Rikki Byrd defines as the temporality of blackness. "So often, blackness—and its gruesome history—can be rendered a garment that can easily be shed when a season no longer begs for its use," she writes in her essay *Black the Color We Wear.*

In the early aughts, hip-hop had a similar impact on fashion as what we've seen in 2017. Remember camo pants, Juicy Couture tracksuits, velour ensembles, bucket hats, and hoop earrings? By the late 2000s, the trend died. The fashion industry looked elsewhere for inspiration and a fair share of white women swore they'd never imitate Jennifer Lopez's look again. But, for the majority of people of color, hoop earrings and hoodies never went out of style because they are endemic to these communities, and were even before the industry decided to get down with the culture.

In light of fashion's cyclical embraces of Black culture, the ephemerality of trends must be questioned, because in an industry dominated white voices, a trend is synonymous with white acceptance.

In 2017, 73 percent of the Business of Fashion 500— a list that highlights the people who mold the international fashion industry— is white. Only 14 percent is Asian, 4.87 percent is classified as other, and a staggering 4.68 percent is Black. The designers adopting streetwear are also white. There is Alessandro Michele from Gucci, who has been largely credited for making the Italian brand cool again; Kim Jones, who crafted the collaboration between Louis Vuitton and Supreme; Demna Gvasalia from Vetements, known for oversized hoodies and a lack of models of color; Marc Jacobs, who after cultural appropriation controversies in 2016 opted to craft a collection rooted in hip-hop culture; and Supreme's founder James Jebbia, who has grown the brand to worldwide fame.

Their actions also depict a ferocious whitewashing of the culture. Vetements has been largely responsible for bringing streetwear to the Paris runways. But the brand's lack of racial diversity in fashion shows speaks volumes about the label's awareness of Black cultural heritage. Sadly, there is close to none. A similar case occurred when Louis Vuitton partnered with Supreme for its fall 2017 menswear collection in January. The two brands seemed to bond after years of copyright lawsuits. But, when their logo-filled, streetwear-inspired collaboration was in the works, the two failed to include Dapper Dan, who originally crafted this type of clothing and was sued in the 1980s by Louis Vuitton for using their logo. Last May, Gucci debuted its Resort

[2018](#) collection, raising Internet eyebrows when Alessandro Michele— the brand's creative director— showed a leather jacket with oversized sleeves that resembled Dapper Dan's work. Michele never credited the Harlem designer. Only after a wave of Internet outrage did the Italian house respond, saying [the jacket was an homage](#).

The outcry served its purpose. By early December, following the controversy, Gucci hung a billboard in Harlem announcing [Dapper Dan and Alessandro Michele's collaboration](#) for the Italian brand's tailoring service. The campaign stars Daniel Day himself in a gray, tailored suit, a look that's become iconic of Day. Dapper Dan [posted a picture of the campaign](#) with the caption, "I went from selling clothes on a table on the sidewalks of [#Harlem](#), now I'm on my own giant billboard on a rooftop in Harlem. I always believed in me and I always believed in Harlem—and I thank GOD for that." Alessandro Michele published a statement in the *New York Times* back in September, saying "I understand that I am putting my hands in a kind of very delicate playground, the black community. But I love the black community. I think they have a big voice in terms of fashion."

The billboard signals a post-racial utopia, both in fashion and real life. But the waves of gentrification around it and the struggle of thousands of people of color who will most likely not be part of Gucci's plans for expansion, turn the whole campaign sour. It's safe to wonder if Gucci is really going down for the culture, or if the collaboration is simply a cover-up for legal mishaps and appropriation dilemmas of the past. Would Gucci be in Harlem if not for Internet outrage? Probably not.

Without voices of color, the latest embrace of Black culture reads more like a business strategy than a genuine attempt at inclusivity. What matters is the $1,100 Vetements hoodie, not the culture that created it.

The fashion industry's disrespect for Black culture inspired Raury, an Atlanta-based rapper, to stage a protest at the Dolce & Gabbana spring 2018 menswear show, which included an abundance of streetwear-inspired pieces. The rapper criticized the Italian brand's ties to Melania Trump and its satirical ad campaign "Boycott Dolce & Gabbana," released after the designers received backlash for dressing the first lady and D&G boycotts were proposed. Raury revealed scribbled messages on his body that read "Protest D&G" and "I am not your scapegoat" after removing a bright yellow, oversized hoodie. Raury was escorted out of the show.

The Internet approved. Stefano Gabbana didn't. "We are Italian and we don't care about politics and mostly neither about the American one!" wrote the designer on Instagram.

It's almost comical that Stefano Gabbana chooses when to care about American politics. The designer often comments on Melania Trump's Instagram pictures when she wears Dolce & Gabbana, and the brand mocked the current political climate and social movements by releasing #Boycott t-shirts. Dolce & Gabbana took all it desired from Black culture, but in matters of social justice, it did not stand up for Black lives.

This is not just an isolated political blind spot, but rather a general industry-wide push back to acknowledge it has a social and political responsibility beyond commerce. As an art form, fashion should and has, at its best, commented on contemporary issues. It did so after the election of Donald Trump when designers put their politics on the runway to stand up for women's rights, LGBTQ rights, and immigrant rights through designs such as Dior's "The Future Is Female" t-shirts and Missoni pussy hats. But, fashion has failed to raise awareness about racism, privilege, and police brutality, even when it's put hoodies on the Paris runways.

In an era when white supremacy lives within the mainstream conversation and African Americans and Latinos are disproportionately targeted by police, it's clear that clothing and the culture behind it affect how people are perceived. A hoodie marked Trayvon Martin a criminal, even when he was unarmed. Chastity Jones' dreadlocks were a sign she was unemployable. The fashion industry is still blind to the social and racial codes associated with these types of clothing. Who gets to wear streetwear without being discriminated against? Who gets to shed the culture once it's no longer in style?

The codes of criminalization and discrimination associated with streetwear worn by Black bodies do not change if the hoodie is Louis Vuitton. "In the hoodie, he [a black man] is a folk demon and a scapegoat, a political symbol and a moving target," wrote Troy Patterson in his essay *The Politics of the Hoodie.* "The system of signs that weighs this upon him does not make special distinctions for an Italian cashmere hoodie timelessly designed in heather gray."

By ignoring these codes, the fashion industry is simply choosing when it's convenient to be political, and when it comes to Black culture, it's clear the industry only wants to wear it as a costume when it's in *Vogue*—literally. Look no further than *Vogue*'s December issue, a special edition starring an array of celebrities of color, from Pharrell and Beyoncé to Michael B Jordan and Imaan Hammam. As much as a push for diversity and an embrace of Black culture is a sign of progress, the cyclical nature of the fashion industry will surely generate a rollback when white executives and trend reports decide hoodies and hoop earrings are no longer in. Most likely, they will not be in *Vogue* by next year.

To stop this cycle of erasure and appropriation, the industry needs to diversify beyond the runway. The Business of Fashion 500 should not have 466 white men out of 535 honorees, that range from models, executives, designers, retailers, and creatives. Real change will come from genuine inclusivity throughout the industry, no matter the trend of the moment.

One place to start would be by examining the racial disparity between design students and high fashion designers. At the Fashion Institute of Technology, students of color make-up 41.4 percent of the school's demographics, according their website, while 45 percent of the students are white. At Parsons, students of color make-up 51.6 percent of the demographic, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling. So, why aren't these numbers reflected in the fashion industry?

Only a handful of labels come to mind that are championing real inclusivity when it comes to Black designers and streetwear on the runways. Kerby Jean-Raymond of Pyer Moss created a t-shirt in 2015 that highlighted the struggle of police brutality. Virgil Abloh of Off-White, who is redefining luxury streetwear. There is also VFiles, a self-proclaimed social media platform for fashion, which profiles young designers of color and stages a competition every year for a chance to show at New York fashion week. The Council of Fashion Designers of America also nominated a record-making four Black designers to its annual CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund. It's a good start.

But it's not enough. Black people can't be used as a device to sell more clothes when hip-hop dominates pop culture. They should sit at the table to bring their own culture— the right way. Otherwise, blackness will continue to be just a trend.