6-2017

Black Models Matter: Challenging the Racism of Aesthetics and the Facade of Inclusion in the Fashion Industry

Scarlett L. Newman

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BLACK MODELS MATTER:
CHALLENGING THE RACISM OF AESTHETICS AND THE FAÇADE OF INCLUSION
IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

By
SCARLETT NEWMAN

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
The City University of New York
2017
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Black Models Matter:

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in the Fashion Industry

by

Scarlett Newman

Advisor: Wayne Koestenbaum

The global fashion market is expanding every day, but often, the global fashion runways do not reflect that reality. On average, black models make up for six percent of models used on the runway during the fashion month calendar. This small percentage is also mirrored in advertisements and editorials featured in popular fashion magazines. In the 1970s, black models were met with great opportunities, and that success trickled down into the 1980s and the 1990s. As the 90s came to a close, top designers opted for an aesthetic that ultimately excluded models of color, but black models beared the brunt of that deal. Since then, the conversation surrounding racism in fashion surfaces every season, as the numbers of black models remains stagnant. Is the fashion industry racist? Who is to blame? How can the issues be addressed so that black models can thrive as their white counterparts have? Will fashion ever exist in an era that mirrors the 1970s?
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Wayne Koestenbaum, my advisor, for his enthusiasm and support for this project. Eugenia Paulicelli for mentoring me through this degree, and being open to all of my facinations and curiosities about fashion. Thank you to Elizabeth Wissinger for providing original text on a subject that is often overlooked. I am grateful to the wonderful professors I have studied under at the Graduate Center. Thank you to Kathy Koutsis, Matt Gold, and Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis of the Liberal Studies program for supporting our small but mighty Fashion Studies program. A special thank you to my fellow fashion scholars in the MALS program—I’ve learned so much from my time spent with all of you, and I am positive my experience wouldn’t have been the same if I had not met you.

Thank you to my mother, Clitha Mason, who sparked my interest in fashion through her broad interests in popular culture. I thank you for encouraging me throughout my entire life to pursue the things that make me happy. You are my hero and my inspiration.
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1. INTRODUCTION

In an industry as influential as fashion is, it is crucial to hold the industry responsible, as we do other creative industries such as film, television and fine art. Black models and influencers of (editors, writers) account for a low percentage of representation in fashion. Black models account for a lower percentage of women who are featured on the runway and large-budget editorial shoots and advertisements. There is a limited demand for black models, and often, a designer can get away with casting one or two black models in their shows. This is *tokenism*, defined as the practice as only making a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of sexual or racial equality within a workforce. Tokenism in fashion is intensely problematic, as it doesn’t fully or accurately represent the people who take an interest in and/or consume luxury fashion.

In practice, a token model allows a designer to avoid the accusation of racism and discrimination. In fashion, the differences in the token model could be over-accentuated to be seen as exotic or glamourous, indicators that emphasize the “otherness” that will distinguish her from her white counterpart.

“Types” are often racially defined without explicitly stating so. A designer can call an agency to request a model that is an “exotic” type or a girl that represents an “all-American” type—coded language for their desire for a model of color in the first instance, and a white model in the second. The significance of skin color is implicit in the creation of “types” used to sort women walking in fashion shows or participating in photo shoots. The normalization of this practice can affect the general assumption about how work should be distributed; with the consequence that black models are given fewer opportunities.
Figure 1: Models sporting multi-colored dreadlocks in the Marc Jacobs S/s 2017 show. Figure 2: A painting depicting “Cultural Appropriation” in simple terms.
In the Autumn/Winter 2016 season, hope was had and supplemented by Zac Posen’s runway tribute to Ugandan princess, Elizabeth of Toro. Posen featured a predominantly black casting, 25 of 30 models to be specific. In an effort to promote his vision of diversity, he donned the “Black Models Matter,” stamped in stylized white letters by black model, activist and artist, Ashley B. Crew. on a large leather bag (presumably his design). “It’s crucial that the new generations see diversity not as an issue, but as an asset, said Posen at the Black in Retail Action Group Gala. “I will continue to battle this on the runway and the red carpet, and for the rest of my life.” In the following Spring/Summer 2017 season, Marc Jacobs sent down a majority of white models down the runway in multi-colored faux dreadlocks, a hairstyle typically attributed to black people and black culture. This constant volleying of the concept of cultural appropriation perpetuates the idea that fashion loves black culture, but not black people. It is essential to push the conversation concerning race outside of fashion week even so that the industry can understand the implications of actions that have previously gone ignored. These decisions not only affect black models, but Black influencers: editors, writers, stylists, photographers, bloggers, etc.—which come as few and far between as the models.

Problems like the ones stated above can be attributed to the absence of black influence in the fashion industry. Influencers, people who are at the top of fashion’s elite, that make the major decisions that affect the way we consume fashion aesthetically and commercially. It seems impossible for black people, black women, particularly, to penetrate these spaces. Exclusion doesn’t just manifest on the runways. It sits at our fingertips as we flip through fashion bibles, publications meant to validate fashion as a respected means of expression. Can we achieve
validation without inclusion, especially of a culture that without it we would be devoid of popular culture?

2. THE RACISM OF AESTHETICS

In my research, I have found that quantitative data representing the number of black models to white models is scarce, or improperly sourced. “The Fashion Spot,” which is heralded for its “diversity reports” following fashion month, oddly, has no source, or refuses to willfully submit that information to its readers. The website used charts, percentages, and infographics to display the “data” that they have quantified for each major fashion city that has participated in Fashion Month. To try and quantify/qualify the data ourselves (in the most ethical way possible), last year my colleagues Alison Boldero and Nicola Certo and I reached out to the editors at The Fashion Spot to see how they came up with the data that was represented on their Diversity Report. We couldn’t get them to cooperate with us. They refused to disclose any information regarding the statistics—well, “percentages” that were on the site. This left us with “missing data” in our efforts to find raw data and actual numbers that showed the disparity between models of color and their white counterparts on the runways.

“Despite media attention to the issue of racial discrimination in hiring models, the industry as a whole has not come forward with the reliable statistics regarding the racial makeup of the modeling workforce. Even Bethann Hardison, the head of the first all-black modelling agency in the United States, and an outspoken critic of fashion industry racism, does not routinely cite government statistics in interviews. To examine the widespread popular understanding that black models are employed less often than white models, in the absence of hard empirical data gathered by a government agency or industry analysts, media outlets as
varied as *Essence, Ebony, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, Women’s Wear Daily, the Guardian, the Telegraph and the Independent*, have counted the number of models of color on the runway during one season, or the number of black models appearing in magazine pages, or relied on agencies’ self-reported head counts of how many models of color are in their books” (Wissinger 2015).

In a 2013 article in the New York Times, Eric Wilson lamented that even after the grandiose response to Vogue Italia’s “Black Issue” (an issue dedicated to Black models), essentially, things remained stagnant in terms of the inclusion of Black models. “The outcry following the appointment of a white fashion director to the staff at *Essence* magazine, in July 2010, however, stemmed at least in part from the widespread understanding that the fashion industry, as the magazine’s editor, Angela Burt-Murray put it, ‘is overwhelmingly white. ‘She went on to point out the underrepresentation of people of color on the mastheads of magazines, the front rows of fashion shows, and as designers and stylists of fashion lines. Overall, within the modeling industry, and in professions that work with models, levels of black employment appear to be far lower than the representative numbers of the population” (Wissinger 2015).

A model’s labor requires striving to meet the aesthetic expectation of the client. Often, a black model’s [aesthetic] labor requires that she goes above and beyond to visually fit within the white standards of beauty. Unless that is, if she’s playing up, or highlighting the things that exotify her. This could include but is not limited to: straightening of the hair, extensive diet and exercise, keeping out of the sun—anything that can be done to minimize their racial characteristics. We don’t often refer to the “white gaze” in the fashion industry, but aesthetic labor placed upon black body is just that. Performing for the white gaze.
3. THE BATTLE OF VERSAILLES

A blink before the 1970s started, riots sparked across every major American city fueled by racial inequity, disenfranchisement, and poverty. The U.S. government itself realized that there was an urgent need to open the doors of social access and visibility to black Americans. “The anger and resentment poured into urban neighborhoods and fueled the ongoing Black Power movement and enthralled a generation of young people, experimental artists, and the fashion industry, which was increasingly influenced by the street and by popular culture. Fashion didn’t like getting political, but it loved being very subversive” (Givhan 2015). Black politics had birthed a burgeoning black aesthetic that was changing mainstream culture. Film was reflecting the values and concerns of the black community, but was also speaking to the multi-dimensions of a people. The cult classic film *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* by Melvin Van Peebles confronted racism and police brutality head on, *Julia*, starring Diahann Carroll made its television debut—the first television show with a black woman as the lead. Judith was capturing audiences on stage as Alvin Ailey’s muse. Black art and expression had a key role in shaping the culture. “The world of fashion was similarly looked to as a place where the culture could find signs of racial progress. Expressions of beauty and glamour mattered. Good race relations required taking note of who was selling women lipsticks and mini skirts, which meant that advertisers began looking for black models” (Givhan 2015). In October 1969, *Life* magazine featured Naomi Sims on the cover with the headline, “Black Models Take Center Stage.” Inside featured a group shot spread of 39 black models represented by a new agency called “Black Beauty,” run by a former white model named Betty Foray. Racial progress was made in a multitude of ways from modeling to styling to spokespersons.
Figure 3: Bethann Hardison and Charlene Dash modelling at the Battle of Versailles, Paris
At the time, Eleanor Lambert was the most powerful person in the fashion industry. She created Fashion Week, the International Best Dressed Awards, and controlled the narrative of American fashion. In an effort to restore the palace of Versailles, she created a dinner and fundraising solution for high society and high fashion. This was also a grand opportunity to heighten the visibility of American designers. Five French designers (Yves Saint Laurent, Pierre Cardin, Emanuel Ungaro, Christian Dior, and Hubert de Givenchy) and Five American designers (Oscar de la Renta, Stephen Burrows, Halston, Bill Blass, and Anne Klein—who brought her then assistant, Donna Karan) battled it out via runway spectaculairs, with the Americans unanimously stealing the show. Apart from the youthful, upbeat, and whimsical performance of “Team America,” their win can be attributed to the fresh and glamorous performances of the ten black models used in the show—an unprecedented number at the time. The roster of black models included: Pat Cleveland, Bethann Hardison, Billie Blair, Jennifer Brice, Alva Chinn, Norma Jean Darden, Charlene Dash, Barbara Jackson, Ramona Saunders, and Amina Warsuma.

The French were stunned. They had never seen African American models with such joie de vivre. They were in shock. The standout athleticism of Pat Cleveland was well known in the states; to the French, it was a revelation. Years to follow that one night in Paris, Oscar de la Renta said that ultimately, “it was the black models that had made the difference.”

Versailles had opened a lot of doors. Black Women were enjoying steady careers and forged ahead with an unprecedented presence that was in demand for years on, into the 1980s to the 1990s. Cue, the birth of the Supermodel. People knew their names, and they attained a level of fame synonymous with the designers of the runways they were walking for. Black women had a certain flair on the runway distinctive of anyone that came before them. Hips flew from side to
side and legs charged forward like Clydesdales. Cue, the birth of superstar, Naomi Campbell, who still graces the top runways today. Tyra Banks followed soon after becoming the first black girl to land a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit cover. “And Detroit’s Veronica Webb swanned down the international runways, maintaining an expression of silent amusement, as if she was just a little too sophisticated for the catwalk silliness. By 1992, Revlon had signed Webb to a cosmetics deal, making her the first African American model to represent a makeup brand (Givhan 2015).

Black models thrived and flipped the culture on its head, crossing boundaries and becoming business women. Versailles model Bethann Hardison became a leading activist for the diversity within the fashion industry and in 1989 co-founded the Black Girls Coalition to celebrate the successes of black women in fashion.

By the mid-1990s, the affinity for black models began to decrease. Designers opted for a new aesthetic that excluded black models. Black models were left in the dark to make way for the grunge era and “heroin” chic which fostered that group of models that included Kate Moss, Stella Tennant, and Kristen McMenamy. Models were more homogenous, so the industry didn’t require models who were bold, or charismatic. There was no more use for stage presence, a big aspect that had previously granted black models work. “The number of working black models in high-profile runway presentations or appearing on the covers of magazines became so dire that stories began appearing in the mainstream media about the ‘whitewashing’ of the runway and what it meant for cultural perceptions of beauty, femininity, and worth. The homogeneity continued for a decade. Finding success on the runway was already a bit like winning the lottery, genetic and otherwise. But if fair-skinned women were having a run of good luck, their darker-skinned colleagues were stuck in a losing streak” (Givhan 2015).
Figure 4: One of three covers shot for Vogue Italia’s “The Black Issue”
4. THE BLACK MODEL MYSTERY

**Vogue Italia, The Black Issue**

The July 2008 Issue of *Vogue Italia* featured *only* black models (photographed by Steven Meisel) and featured articles that pertained to black women in the arts and entertainment industry. This was Franca Sozzani’s (the late Editor-in-Chief of Vogue Italia) response to the anger and outspokenness caused by the imbalance or “disinclination” of fashion magazines to showcase on their covers and in their editorial spreads. Casting directors, agencies, and designers claimed that black models are hired less often because they don’t sell. This statement, along with the influence of protest groups challenging racism in the fashion industry, convinced Franca Sozzani to create “The Black Issue.” The issue included established heavyweights like Viviene Tan, Alek Wek, Naomi Campbell, Liya Kebede, Veronica Webb, Iman, and Tyra Banks. It also included contemporary notables like Jourdan Dunn, Chanel Iman, Arlemis Sosa, and Toccara Jones, the first black, plus-sized model to be in the pages of *Vogue Italia*.

Contrary to “not selling,” The Black Issue became the greatest selling issue of Vogue Italia. It ran out of print twice, making it the first time in Condé Nast’s’ history that a reprint was issued to satisfy demand. But did *Vogue Italia* necessarily get it right? Amongst all the black models used in the issue, there wasn’t a trace of kinky, curly, or natural hairstyles to grace the pages. It’s as if all the black attributes were erased to satisfy *Vogue’s* already whitewashed aesthetic. But what is black without blackness? How does a special issue of a fashion magazine dedicated to black beauty appeal to the black consumer with the absence of blackness? This is black girls as white girls: all aquiline noses, large eyes, oval faces (bar the standard exception of “unusual” Alek Wek), hair coaxed into silky straightness or carefully turbaned away in shot after shot. As for “black,” it’s more latte than Americano. By simultaneously marking blackness as
“special” and yet ensuring conformity to dominant (white and European) ideas of sophistication and beauty, the “black issue” tells us a great deal about race and ethnicity in the media today. To be non-white is to be constantly regulated to a “special issue,” while the regular edition remains determinedly white” (Gopal 2008). It’s been nine years since The Black Issue was published, and the fight for racial equality in the fashion industry has not let up. “Franca and her team stood by diversity,” said Bethann Hardison. “I don’t know that is was influential or that it has had any lasting impact. Unfortunately, we havne’t seen the huge changes in the number of black models on the runway in Paris, Milan, or New York. Black models are still having trouble getting covers and big contracts. But that issue was a shining moment that saw us for who we are.”

The Colour of Beauty, Film

The most successful models in the fashion industry have white or European looking features, which calls for more intensive labor demands for black models. The long-standing history of the hyper-sexualization of black women in the media is then translated to how they are represented in fashion. The lens is very limited for black models. They are often found performing for the white gaze.

The Colour of Beauty is a short documentary that examines the racism played out in the fashion industry. Centering on Renee Thompson, an aspiring black model, who clearly has the drive, the model body, and the model face—her success remains stagnant as it is her white counterparts that excel around here and are chosen to walk in the fashion week shows. This film puts a magnifying glass to the issue, as insiders explain why black models aren’t as successful.

In an interview, Justin Peery, fashion agent, said “The [black] girls that are really being featured in everything, they really have unique features for African Americans. You know, they
very skinny nose, the eloquent faces. They really look like white girls that were painted black. That’s beauty, ya know? To the industry’s perspective, to an agent’s perspective—when they see that, when they see a girl that can look different by skin pigment and still have great features like that, it’s sellable. When you come in with big eyes, big nose, big this or big lips—things that are common traits in African Americans, it doesn’t work. So that’s why it’s so hard for agencies to have ethnic models, they literally have to be flawless, you know, the 15 white girls you got, three or four of them may not be flawless, but in the African American realm, the model has to be perfect.”

“I’ve heard people say, ‘blacks don’t move product, or blacks don’t buy our clothes,’” said Renee Thompson, an aspiring black model at the time. “Black women are not our demographic. They’re always expecting a white girl for major products. They’re always expecting that Barbie-ish image to sell something. It’s just something that they lean on, it’s a crutch. You’re constantly under scrutiny over something you can’t do about.”

During an intimate confession, Maurilio Carnilio, a casting director, told the cameras, “She’s womanly, so she has kind of like a woman figure and at this moment, without being anorexic, the girls are like a little bit more thin. Black models, they tend to be a little “wider” hips, a little bit more round and so sometimes she has a fit problem. It’s not that I’m saying we don’t want a black model, we just need to find “the right” black model. One time one of my clients said I need a black model, but she needs to be a white girl dipped in chocolate.” This tendancy speaks to similar sentiments that are still perpetuated by casting directors and designers in the modeling industry.

Representation plays a major role in media and consumption, and the fashion industry continues to disregard the plea from its consumers to be reflected and represented, especially as
of late. The internet has fostered a generation of conscious fashion enthusiasts that regularly and outspokenly advocate for race representation in the fashion industry. There are many platforms for people to voice their concerns, but the reach is stagnant as Fashion continues to make progress at a snail’s pace. Lisa Tant, the Editor-In-Chief of Flare magazine said, “When you look at the emerging markets in the fashion industry—China, Brazil, India—if we keep sending all white models down the runway, that isn’t gonna speak to the consumers in those markets, and any designer that continues to do that runs the risk of being irrelevant. It was interesting with Italian Vogue, the editor there decided to make a big statement about this, the entire issue, everything from the cover and all of the editorials featured black models. The issue sold out in the U.S. and the U.K. in just 72 hours. Is that gonna mean the nature of the industry is changing? As some people sort of said it would, you know? I knew that it would not mean much except that yes, it was a nod to black models everywhere, but was it really gonna change the shape of things to come? No, not really
5. THE STAGNENT OUTSPOKENNESS OF NAOMI CAMPBELL AND OTHER EFFORTS

In 2013, fueled by the incessant lack of race representation in the fashion industry, Bethann Hardison, Iman, and Naomi Campbell (three very successful black models) created the Diversity Coalition, a campaign created to increase inclusion in runway shows. They started by sending written complaints to the Council of Fashion Designers (the CFDA) and other governing bodies of international fashion. A strongly worded letter posted on the coalition’s website Balance Diversity reads: “Eyes are on an industry that season after season watches fashion design houses consistently use one or no models of color. No matter the intention, the result is racism. Not accepting another based on the color of their skin is clearly beyond 'aesthetic' when it is consistent with the designer’s brand. Whether it’s the decision of the designer, stylist or casting director, that decision to use basically all white models, reveals a trait that is unbecoming to modern society.”
THIS IS A FILM REFLECTING MY DISGUST AT THE ACCEPTANCE OF RACISM IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

Nick Knight

THE MODEL IN THIS FILM IS NAOMI CAMPBELL. SHE IS WEARING TWO DRESSES BY THE NEW YORK DESIGNERS RODARTE: ONE BLACK, ONE WHITE.

Nick Knight

I AM VIRTUALLY NEVER ALLOWED TO PHOTOGRAPH BLACK MODELS FOR THE MAGAZINES, FASHION HOUSES, COSMETIC BRANDS, PERFUME COMPANIES AND ADVERTISING CLIENTS I WORK FOR.

Nick Knight
Subjective, by Nick Knight and Naomi Campbell

On the SHOWstudio website, Subjective is described as, “Having addressed the tricky, tricksy and often veiled subject of body size hand-in-hand with the equally inflammatory subject of feminism in his first Political Fashion film, Nick Knight now chooses to tackle the outright taboo subject of racism in the fashion industry. Despite increasing diversity throughout contemporary society, is undoubtedly true that black models feature in fashion far less than their white counterparts. Nick’s film not only questions this, but as a fashion ‘insider’ takes the industry to task over one of the last arenas where racism is apparently a tacitly-accepted fact of life.”

Naomi Campbell, one of the most prominent and recognizable faces in the fashion industry, has been fighting to eliminate racism and discrimination tactics on the runway. During the time that her SHOWstudio collaboration was made, she had teamed up with the “Diversity Coalition” (herself, Iman; model and Bethann Hardison; model turned fashion activist) to call out
and accuse prominent fashion houses for snubbing Black and Asian models on the catwalk, editorial spreads and campaigns.

“I’m saying that the act of not choosing models of colors is racist, so we’re not calling them [designers and casting directors] racist, we are saying the act is racist,” said Campbell.

Campbell’s voice has influenced London fashion houses to acknowledge fashion diversity, with special credit going to Burberry, Topshop and Tom Ford, who have since seen an increase in the models of color on their runways. British model Jourdan Dunn has been repetitively outspoken about being turned away from casting directors because of the color of her skin. Are casting directors to blame? They usually route the blame to the actual designers, who then reroute the racist accusation back to the casting directors. No one will overtly declare that they prefer a white aesthetic, and that it’s “more desirable.” How can that be when the fashion industry notoriously, repetitively and unapologetically appropriates cultures of color, most often, black culture? As if appropriation isn’t problematic enough, white models have been shot in actual blackface. This act excludes black aesthetics and cultures to satisfy the fantasy of “brown skin with white features.” The blackface phenomenon is an historic act of racism used to dehumanize and humiliate black people, and reinforced the idea of black people being the inferior race to whites. Although these appropriative spreads aren’t intentionally practicing overt racism, it becomes a racial microaggression—a verbal or non-verbal insult that intentionally or non-intentionally communicates hostile, derogatory or negative messages to target people based solely upon their marginalized group membership. Nick Knight has in a way “subverted” this issue through his creative vessel with Campbell in motion alongside blatant messages that
condemn the ongoing racial exclusion in the fashion industry. As much as black celebrities continue to fight for equality in the industry, Knight’s involvement as an affluent, privileged white male can be quite influential to combat racism in fashion through his creative and political statements. With this, fashion will have the potential to thrive (more broadly) as a cultural pillar that reflects its consumers, intellectuals and enthusiasts.

**Naomi Campbell on Racism in Fashion, Channel 4 News**

Below is a transcript of an interview that Naomi Campbell gave to Channel 4, a popular news network in the United Kingdom, in 2013. At the time, the conversation surrounding “diversity” and “inclusion” on the runway were very potent and The Diversity Coalition was getting a lot of press. This interview speaks to the idea of frivolity that people associate with fashion, as the tone of the interviewer is dismissive and condescending. At one point in the conversation, his interviewee must remind him that she has been working continuously in her respected industry for now, over 30 years.

Interviewer: Are you essential accusing the industry, that you’ve done very well in, of being racist?

Campbell: No, I’m saying the act of not choosing models of color is racist, so we’re not calling them racist, we’re saying the act is racist, and I’m also saying that they may not intentionally know. They hire casting directors, they hire stylists and they are now the ones that choose the models, not so much the designer anymore, so it’s not directly the designer, but it does affect their house and their brand.
Interviewer: So, what you’re saying is that over 80% of, 82% of walks of fashion runways were white models, and 6% black?

Campbell: 6% Black and 9% Asian.

Interviewer: And was this worse than what it was when you went into the business, what, 27 years ago?

Campbell: Yes, it is, cause when I was modelling, I did Yves Saint Laurent, Azzedine Alia, Gianni Versace—there was a great balance of models and color.

Interviewer: But you’re a world famous super model, why can’t you go up to Victoria Beckham—

Campbell: Well, who says I haven’t?

Interviewer: And what has Victoria Beckham said?

Campbell: I haven’t gone up to Victoria Beckham, but who says I haven’t gone up to the designers that I’m friendly with and said, “why are you not using more models of color?” I have!

Interviewer: And what do they say?
Campbell: “We want to, you’re right!” but it doesn’t happen.

Interviewer: You’re the face that launched a thousand magazine covers, your success that black models can be extremely successful.

Campbell: We don’t want them to hide behind the aesthetic of when they say well the show is gonna be this aesthetic, this season. We want them to just allow balance diversity. And yes, I have walked for 27 years, almost 28 and it’s very upsetting to me—it’s heartbreaking to be sitting here in 2013 having this interview.

Interviewer: You’ve named really big brands: Calvin Klein, Armani, Prada—has it got to the point where you will not work for companies that you feel are involved in racism?

Campbell: Well I’m lucky enough that I work on television now and I still do modelling as well, obviously, and I’m not trying to accuse and point fingers and embarrass anyone. We’re just basically trying to say, be aware.

Interviewer: And does the British end of things particularly disappoint you given that you’re Stratton born and bred, that you’re naming Alexander McQueen, you’re naming Mulberry.

Campbell: I’m not pointing at one country, I’m pointing at the fashion industry as a whole.
Interviewer: But you’re naming Alexander McQueen and you’re naming Mulberry, you’ve named Victoria Beckham—

Campbell: Because they haven’t used models of color!

Interviewer: And how will you measure success from your campaign?

Campbell: The New York shows just ended. Big difference. Huge difference. Six black models in Calvin Klein. There were more last year. So, things are changing.

Interviewer: You’re quite famous for having Nelson Mandela as a role model, I’m wondering whether you feel like this is your campaign—

Campbell: I feel like this is our campaign. And as I said, Bethann Hardison is a woman that I’ve looked up to and known since I’m 15 years old, and Iman, also the same—huge respect to them both. And I feel if I’m able to open my mouth—something Mr. Mandela told me I could do when I was younger—you can use your mouth to help others, you can speak to help others.

It’s hard to watch an established model plead for human decency from these designers.
6. CASE STUDIES AND EXAMINATIONS

The Stereotypes of Black and White Women in Fashion Magazine Photographs: The Pose of the Model and the Impression She Creates, 2006

Analyses of print media have demonstrated a history of racial in addition to gender stereotyping in the images of men and women in advertising. In *The Stereotypes of Black and White Women in Fashion Magazine Photographs: The Pose of the Model and the Impression She Creates*, Jennifer E. Millard and Peter R. Grant examined the portrayal of black and white women in magazine spreads (advertising and fashion modelling). In the first study, photographs were collected from *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *Vogue*. A content analysis showed that image stereotyping against Black models was still prevalent.

The study of how black women are portrayed in fashion media has been restricted because companies rarely use Black models in advertisements. “For example, Kassarjian (1969) found that Black Models in advertisements comprised less than one-third of one percent of the total advertisements found among the pages of several genres of magazines (e.g. *Life*, *Vogue*, *Popular Mechanics*). Decades later, Plous and Neptune (1997) found that approximately 10% of the advertisements in magazines that were oriented towards White readers, a proportion that closely represents the proportion of Black people in the population of the United States.”

Traditionally, Black women have been stereotyped as inferior, subservient (to Whites) models like “The Mammy,” “The Jezebel,” and “The Sapphire.” 50 years ago, the images of black people in print media were reduced to servitude such as maids and waiters—generally belonging to the lowest occupational categories. In terms of fashion imaging, Black people have been characterized in derogatory stereotypes concerning their limited intelligence and
aggressiveness. Magazine advertisements that feature Black women have become less derogatory, but will sometimes slip in stereotypic imagery. “Study 1” pertains more to the subject of this thesis, so I will refer to it for analysis.

**Study 1**

Photographs from *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *Vogue* were chosen to be the unit of analysis in their study, as they were the three best-selling beauty/fashion magazines in North America in 1999. 226 photographs were selected from 25 different issues of those three magazines. Full-page fashion photographs and advertisements were selected in which (1) the focal character was an adult woman and (2) the photograph featured a beauty or fashion product. Advertisements and fashion photographs that featured a black woman were selected first because they occur with relative infrequency in these magazines. Then, advertisements and fashion photographs that featured a white woman were chosen at random from those that were available. From the 25 magazine issues, only 57 advertisements were and 43 fashion photographs of Black women that met the criteria were found. The final sample consisted of 120 advertisements (63 White models, 57 Black models) and 106 fashion photographs (63 White models, 43 Black Models).

Relatively few Black models (9%) were found in the full-page photographs within this sample of beauty/fashion magazines. In fashion photographs, most the models were White (91%). Similarly, photographs of White models appeared in approximately 89% of the full-page ad pages, and photographs of Black models constitute the remaining 11%. Few or no pictures depicted any other racial groups. “According to the Unites States Census Bureau (2001), approximately 13% of the general U.S. population is Black.” Within this sample, therefore, Black women are underrepresented, slightly more so in fashion photographs than in
advertisements. Further study and a larger sample would be required to provide more exact estimates of the degree to which Black women are underrepresented.
Skin Deep New York Fashion Week


Evolution from Project Pitch to Final Thesis

When the project was first conceived, the initial idea intended to create an interactive graph based on similar models made popular online by the editors at Polygraph. We planned to chart the amount of non-white models on the runway across a sample selection from the most popular runway shows at New York Fashion Week Spring 2016, which began on February 11 and ended on February 18. This would have been in an effort to show the approximate disparity between models of color and white models on the runway.

Using Basecamp, a shared Google Drive folder, and GitHub as spaces for collaboration and communication, we spent the semester brainstorming and familiarizing ourselves with tools such as Adobe Photoshop, OS X Terminal for navigating files and uploading to GitHub, and WordPress before beginning to set up our project website on Reclaim Hosting using customized HTML, CSS, and JavaScript. Because of the direction our project took halfway through the semester, we could not utilize more digital humanities tools due to our final product’s narrative focus.

A majority of the data we sought out was inaccessible, so we instead investigated the narrative of our semester’s research based on the information we weren’t able to obtain. Our group hoped to overcome the lack of information by collecting our own from primary sources, but we were greatly discouraged when we failed to accomplish this by the middle of the
semester. At the same time, we had gathered a number of theoretical sources for conceptualizing our project but had no data to apply it to. Faced with the possibility that we might have to abandon “Skin Deep at NYFW,” we made the decision to move away from a data science project and interrogate the absence of data as indicative of a deeper problem in the fashion model industry.

We repurposed “Skin Deep at NYFW” in order to explore the intersection of cultural consumption, currency, and diversity in fashion. Our project, which we have chosen to continue working on after the end of this semester, aims to use long form visual storytelling and descriptive statistics on select but incomplete data from the most recent New York Fashion Week and assess the significance of missing and messy data as indicators of erasure and tokenism in the industry.

**Key Meetings**

1. **Tuesday, April 5: Meeting with Matt Daniels, Co-creator and Editor at Polygraph**

   We met with Matt Daniels, as we were inspired by his data visualization website, Polygraph. Before the meeting, we were in a position where we could not move forward with the data collection, but we weren’t necessarily ready to give up on our original idea. When we asked Matt about qualifying models of color, he suggested that we start from Wikipedia and then from there to qualify the models ourselves. When we asked him about copyright and photo usage, he had no qualms dismissing the legalities that might have been involved in using the photo of a model or artist. Based on his experience, he never encountered a cease and desist, or anything of
the like. We inquired about the programs he put his data though, which happened to be D-3, but he advised that our project would do well using programming languages such as HTML, CSS, and JavaScript.

2. *Thursday, April 7: Meeting with Jennifer Tang, GC Digital Fellow*

   Two days after our group reached our midsemester deadline with only an incomplete dataset and a seemingly unending list of dead ends, we met with Jennifer Tang, a GC Digital Fellow, to examine the information we were able to collect and discuss the theory we had compiled to better understand racial categorization. From our meeting, we were able to identify three main narrative threads: missing and messy data, tokenism, and racial categorization.

   Splitting up these three main threads between us, we began to turn our attention away from and let go of our original data project to explore issues behind the lack of data revealed by the industry’s unwillingness to share this information or create a process for collecting race and ethnicity data according to government standards.

3. *Tuesday, April 12: Meeting with Alycia Sellie, Librarian at the Graduate Center Library*

   We met with Alycia Sellie, Assistant Professor and Associate Librarian for the Collections Department and the Graduate Center Library, to discuss copyright and fair use regarding the images we had saved online from *Vogue*. Although there were a number of concerns to consider, our group decided to move forward and begin developing our visualizations to supplement our respective threads. Alycia had shared with us a number of
informative documents, and our main takeaway from the meeting was that our use of Vogue’s digital runway images must be “transformative” in some nature and geared towards educating others for it to fall under fair use. While we were not able to make use of all the visualizations we hoped to build by the end of the semester, the stacked images we were able to use during the final presentation showcase represented the type of transformations we will continue to work on in order to show a story as well as tell one.

We felt that it was necessary to include summaries of these particular meetings because they occurred during those two weeks midsemester when our group came to terms with the reality of our failures and how best to approach these failures within the context of an experimental course. It was important that we had spoken with three key people at this time because it gave us the motivation to continue pushing forward during class time with our classmates, our professor, and the other GC Digital Fellows who attended and helped us. Our final paper expands on the narratives threads we identified with Jennifer Tang, the setbacks we encountered the significance of missing and messy data, and how tokenism functioned as mechanism of suppression. We also consider the implications of racial categorization as a standardized process for preventing discrimination and making meaning out of identity.

**Missing and Messy Data**

*Unsuccessful Methodologies and Realizations*

We selected eight runway shows that have been cited in the majority of publications
according to the most influential fashion editorials. We considered *Vogue*, *WWD*, *Elle*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *V Magazine*, *NYT Style Magazine*, *T Magazine*, i-D, *Business of Fashion* and *Fashionista.com* as main fashion magazines that covered NYFW A/W 2016, and the resulting top designers that we would have scour in our data collection were Alexander Wang, Calvin Klein, DKNY, Marc Jacobs, Proenza Schouler, Ralph Lauren, Rodarte and Tommy Hilfiger.

In order to start the Model Roster for each show that we came across in the first phase of our project, we used Models.com as main resource: “Models.com is one of the most influential news sites and creative resources within the fashion industry reaching over 1.3 million unique visitors per month. The site features an extensive database and industry directory, feature interviews of the movers and shakers of the industry, and its influential top rankings.” The database provided the name of every fashion model who walked in the show, as well as their agency, casting directors who coordinated and hired the models, and lastly the number of shows they walked in during Fashion Week.

The most significant aspect to begin a discussion about diversity on the runway and, in a larger scale, about diversity in the business of fashion, was to find the ethnicity of each model about whom we collected information of in the project. Models.com couldn’t provide any information about their ethnicity, but the necessity to follow a precise methodology in identifying the race of each model was indeed crucial.

We started looking at different projects that, like ours, attempted to analyze the disparity of race during Fashion Week. We found firstly *The Fashion Spot*, the web’s largest community of
fashion influencers which published an online report of model diversity during NYFW A/W 2016.

The website posted an infographic of the report they executed, presenting race percentages of models’ ethnicity on the runway, in a format that wouldn’t be used as valid data. We managed to contact Jennifer Davidson, Managing Editor at The Fashion Spot, to ask her how they collected their data, since it would have been crucial for ours. The terminology they used treated race on the runway: where did they get their statistics and data? Fortunately, Jennifer responded saying: “For our sources, we first have industry experts who identify each of the models in the major shows. Then we confirmed their ethnic backgrounds based on Internet searches and by reaching out to modeling agencies where necessary. We then created a detailed spreadsheet and examine the data for our final reports. It can be difficult to ID each model. You may want to check out our forums where members often create show-lists with all of the model names” (Jennifer Davidson). Their method was pretty clear, contacting agencies and Internet searches could have been our methodology. What they did was simply classifying and identifying race, according to the word of Casting Directors, personal knowledge and free categorization.

The second method we tried to consider as valid for our data collection was very similar to The Fashion Spot; this time we came across Jezebel, a blog geared towards women, under the tagline “Celebrity, Sex, Fashion for Women,” with Emma Carmichael as managing editor. They provided infographics similar to The Fashion Spot, categorizing models’ ethnicity through a web
search, agencies and personal knowledge, similarly to The Fashion Spot. Here the methodology isn’t clear either, and the data set we gathered from it came out as incomplete.

Using projects managed by Jezebel and The Fashion Spot brought us to consider their data not objective enough to be used as paradigms. It was, instead, essential for the methodology of our project to identify models’ ethnicity from a primary source, which prompted us to contact the casting directors who coordinated each runway show. This is one process that would have allowed us to understand how models are racially identified without relying on identifying the models ourselves or using similarly subjective processes. Below is an example of the email we had used when reaching out to casting directors and agency contacts for requesting race and ethnicity data for the models they employed:

To: (Casting Director or Agency Contact) Subject: CUNY Fashion Studies + Digital Humanities Data Visualization Project
Hello!
My name is Scarlett Newman, and I am a student at The Graduate Center, CUNY getting my M.A. in Fashion Studies and Digital Humanities. I am writing to you on behalf of my production team, as we are currently in the midst of executing a data visualization project for our end-of-semester final. In our project, we are exploring issues of diversity on the runway and by the end hope to have charted every model of color (within the eight runway shows we’ve chosen to feature) who walked at NYFW A/W 2016. In an effort to be as accurate as possible, we are humbly requesting a model roster from the following shows ______ and we would need the ethnicity of each model, as that information is the most significant aspect of the project. It is also essential for the methodology of our project that we identify the ethnicity of each model from the most legitimate source, which is why we are contacting Casting Directors. We look forward to working with you and forging a fashion space into the Digital Humanities. If you are willing to collaborate with us, we will credit you in our final project, on our website.
Best, Scarlett Newman

We contacted twenty casting directors but only two of them responded. The first one indicated that she was uncomfortable sharing this information: “...this is a very interesting
project! I can send you a roster, but you are going to have to reach out to their agents (or just Google - quite accurate these days) to see where they are from exactly. I believe I know most but would not want to give you wrong information.”

The Google search was exactly what we were trying to avoid, since the result that we could obtain through it would have not been as valid a paradigm. The second one, Kate Rushing, Casting Director for Silent Models NY, responded with the name of the two white models from the agency: “Love this project - I did something related to this a few years ago. It's definitely an important issue and I'm really glad you're addressing it. Mathilde and Line are both white, from Denmark.” Unfortunately we couldn’t continue with the data collection gathered following this methodology because only two out of twenty emailed us back, and the result showed that our data collection was unsuccessful and incomplete.

We started this path with the desire of reaching a decent data collection able to give a precise idea of those twisted dynamics that “Skin Deep” represented, but what we were looking for was missing and the limited information we received was messy, because it did not belong to an ontological objectivity necessary for a project such as ours to be realistic.

The failure is actually the symptom that the issue is real, and the more we try to gather a sort of data not objective enough for a data science project, the more we risk dropping in the practice of self-identifying models of color, not having a legitimate source to actually say something that comes out as the truth and to finally change the industry. There is in fact, a lack of attention paid to race as an important factor in the model industry.
Figure 7: Model, Lineisy Montero, used in the Skin Deep NYFW case for Tokenism
Tokenism as Racist Deception

Tokenism is defined as the practice of only making a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of sexual or racial equality within a workforce. In the context of our research, tokenism is a tactic used in the fashion industry to satisfy a “diversity quota” on the runway and/or in editorial endeavors, usually photoshoots. White models are hired on a larger scale in these instances, leaving little to no room for models of color. There is a limited demand for models of color on the runway, and often a designer can get away with using one MOC (Model of Color). This is problematic, as it doesn’t reflect all men or women who take an interest in/consume luxury fashion.

In practice, tokenism misrepresents the token person as a man or woman of inferior job skills and work capacity relative to other workers of the group. In the context of our project, the token model allows the designer to avoid the accusation of stereotyping or discrimination against the minority group. In fashion, it can be noted that the differences in the token model could be over-accentuated to be seen as exotic or glamorous, indicators that emphasize the otherness the token MOC from the white models.
Figure 8: A photo from the New York Times Article, “Fashion’s Blind Spot” depicting tokenism
Types are often racially defined without clearly saying so. A client will call an agency looking for a model who is an “exotic” type, or an “All American” preppy look, language that veils their desire for a model of color in the first instance, and a blond, blue-eyed model in the second. The significance of skin color is implicit in the creation of “types” used to organize work in the industry, and affects gatekeepers’ assumptions about how work should be distributed, with the consequence that black models are given limited opportunities.

Astou, a Senegalese runway model who worked the collections for all the major fashion capitals for years, came up against this attitude in her high fashion work. Her particular appearance, walk, or personality seemed to matter little in her quest for employment; in her experience, being black was often all that counted: “It’s very difficult, because when you go to an agency, they only have one black girl. That’s all they want. That’s enough. For blonds, you know they have different types of blonds, different features. But for me, you just have to be black” (Wissinger 2015). This statement implies that the semiotics of skin tone override the value of whatever other skills or other special features the model might possess.

For our project, we’ve chosen a top model of the moment, Lineisy Montero, who made her runway debut in the Prada A/W 2015 show in Milan. Lineisy is a black model from Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. She is widely recognized for her natural hair, something that has not been embraced on the runway since her debut. In our research, she has been a victim of tokenism in the A/W 2016 shows. Out of the 10 shows we catalogued, Lineisy walked in seven of
them. While the opportunities for white models generally seem endless, one or two MOC (models of color) across the board seem to be used to create the facade that diversity factors into the way they cast their shows.

Amongst a handful of top models, there is a recurring theme in their testimony in regards to being a model of color amidst a sea of white models on the runway. In an interview with Harper’s Bazaar magazine, Afro-Latina model, Joan Smalls told Derek Blasberg, “I have dealt with adversity from people who I thought were on my side. Past agents, when I would come to them for advice, would just tell me, ‘there’s only room for one girl of color.’”

Chanel Iman told The Sunday Times, “A few times I got excused by designers who told me we already found one black girl. We don’t need you anymore. When someone tells you ‘we don’t want you because we already have one of your kind’ it’s really sad.”

**Zac Posen Autumn/Winter ‘16**

Since the employees in the workplace are few, their visibility is heightened among the Majority, subjecting them to a greater pressure to perform above and beyond their counterparts. This season at NYFW, Zac Posen, an American designer made a bold statement with his mostly black casting at his Autumn/Winter show. Twenty-five of the thirty-three models in Posen’s show were black women. The inspiration behind his line was the Ugandan Princess, Elizabeth of Toro. “Since the inspiration was Elizabeth of Toro, it made sense to have a casting reflecting this,” Posen told CNN Style. “Their presence and the diversity of the casting complemented the collection and made it more striking.” In an effort to promote that vision, Posen posted a photo
on his personal Instagram account of himself donning a large leather bag that read, “BLACK MODELS MATTER” in stylized white letters, created by Ashley B. Chew, a black model, artist and activist. “It is crucial that the new generations see diversity as not an issue, but as an asset,” Posen said at the Black in Retail Action Group gala. “I will continue to battle this on the runway and the red carpet, and for the rest of my life.”

**Squad Goals, W Magazine**

In the May 2016 issue of W Magazine, Fashion and Style director, Edward Enninful styled and conceptualized a photo shoot called “Squad Goals,” in an effort to challenge the idea of tokenism. Shot by Steven Klein, “Squad Goals” features predominantly black models. It addresses the issue of tokenism by capturing “reverse tokenism” In this spread, one white model is photographed in a sea of black models. In a Facebook Live discussion, Enninful said, “There was a moment five or six years ago when designers were not using models of color, and there would always be one. That’s what makes this story so interesting. It was almost like a social experiment. We’re so used to seeing models of color being used once in an editorial, or in a show, how will people react when it’s the other way around?” “What I found was it didn’t make a difference to people. It is what it is. It’s a beautiful story with beautiful girls and it’s the world we live in, really.”

In 2013, while in Paris for Couture Week, posted a Twitter message that said, “If all of my (white) counterparts are seated in the front row, why should I be expected to take 2nd row? Racism? Xoxo,” adding to the already controversial conversation surround race and fashion that year. Edward Enniful (Ghanaian born, British raised) has been a widely recognized, celebrated and successful fashion stylist for over 25 years. In an interview, he didn’t disclose which
designer’s show he was at, to avoid political fallout, but it hadn’t convinced him that things that things were changing despite the issues being increasingly addressed. “Change always takes time,” Mr. Enninful said. The fashion industry needs to breed a different way of thinking. We need more diverse people working in all facets of the industry. It’s not only the models that need to reflect diversity, it is the image makers who set the trends that the rest of the industry follows too. What is happening on the runway is the result of a very Eurocentric aesthetic that has taken over the past 10 years, he said. And that has excluded other races.”

Enninful’s efforts are enough to start a conversation, but acts of inclusion, in order to stick and to be normalized in this industry, cannot exist inconsistently or when there is a call for it. To provide a genuine reflection of the world we live in, influencers in the fashion industry must address racism as a pressing issue and continue to give models of color the same opportunities as their white counterparts.
Figure 9: A photograph from the W Magazine, “Squad Goals,” styled by Edward Enninful, photographed by Steven Klein
Racial Categorization

From the very beginning, our group struggled to avoid establishing our own perimeters for identifying the race and ethnicity of each model. When we studied available literature criticizing the lack of diversity in the employment of models of color, we found that there was neither a precedence nor standardized process for the collection of race and ethnicity data in the fashion model industry. In “Managing the Semiotics of Skin Tone: Race and Aesthetic Labor in the Fashion Modeling Industry,” Elizabeth Wissinger states that: Quantitative data regarding black models’ versus white models’ employment rates are scarce, and existing reports tend to be gleaned from journalistic sources or anecdote. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics only began tracking the number of “demonstrators, product promoters, and models” as a category sometimes in the early 1990s, and their statistics are not broken down by race or gender. (Wissinger 129)

We found this reality both discouraging and mystifying considering that the subject of racial diversity at NYFW has been trending on social media and continues to inspire various fashion designer initiatives that address this very topic. The lack of progress made in implementing labor reform in the fashion industry, from sweatshops to equal opportunity in the employment of models, suggests either that the industry is unwilling to change or that the industry’s aesthetic standards are inherently racist and that much must be done in order to begin unpacking the dusty layers and reorganize from the ground up. During the final presentation showcase, we shared the realization that race and racial categorization is messy and problematic but necessary in telling
stories about racial disparity in any labor industry, especially one such as the fashion model industry that influences much of popular culture.

**Moving Forward**

Moving forward, we hope that our project can contribute to an ongoing conversation addressing racial diversity on both the runway and other labor industries. We are currently working on making live a website chronicling our research in a long form narrative format and hope to implement stronger outreach methods for collecting information directly from the models themselves in order to better understand the racial makeup of those who walk NYFW.

By the next NYFW, scheduled to occur from September 8 – 15, we hope to have collected more data from the previous NYFW in order to demand more from the fashion industry using our Twitter and our website.

*skindeepnyfw.com*
7. CONCLUSION

The 1970s saw a golden era in fashion for the black model. Black people in America, despite racial inequality, disenfranchisement, and poverty, were birthing the “Black is Beautiful” moment, which gave them visibility and elevated their sense of pride. Black culture began penetrating all types of media and influenced many art forms, notably, high fashion. As the movement took off, fashion’s decision makers saw the need to include black models on the runway and in glamorous fashion editorials and advertisements. American fashion designers took an unprecedented chance on ten black models who stormed the runway, winning the Battle of Versailles against the already established French designers. Even through the 1990s (the era of peak Supermodels) black women saw steady careers in modelling. Models were becoming household names and experiencing a heightened level of fame. Naomi Campbell, Veronica Webb, and Tyra Banks experienced a variety of “firsts,” and were thriving in their careers. This moment in fashion was the antithesis of what was to come. The aesthetics of the fashion designer began to change, and black models suffered. So drastically—that the exclusion of black models had the world asking, “Is the fashion industry racist?” Since then, black models have not been used in the same volume as they were previously. They are only experiencing “moments” that are few and far between. Vogue Italia’s Black issue was a huge moment, showcasing the talent of black models and influencers. In conversation with Fashion scholar and educator Kim Jenkins, she shared her sentiments regarding the issue and said,

In 2008 I was an anthropology and art history undergraduate student and had not yet become a fashion studies graduate student (and later, professor). That said, I was satisfied with the “The Black Issue”, and found it to be a long-overdue antidote to the dearth of representation of black models at the turn of the 21st century (though it’s worth noting that
this was not so much of an issue in the 1980s and 1990s). Upon critical inspection, I’m not so confident that a dedicated issue for black fashionability should be considered a solution—it isolates black women. Not to diminish the legacy of the late Franca Sozzani, as I’m certain that her intentions for “The Black Issue” were sincere and considered homage, but increased visibility and fair representation in the fashion industry could perhaps best be resolved through: integration within the magazine pages and street ad campaigns, seats at the executive table, models on the runway and editors on the front row. Through those proposed solutions, “the black issue” will then be resolved, so to speak.

According to casting directors, models of color get more work when they have European features such as thin lips, thin noses, and narrow hips. There is a belief that the black girls don’t push product, but that belief does not reflect the emerging fashion markets worldwide. The lack of representation has encouraged people who work directly and indirectly in the industry to speak out on the injustices that go on within it, particularly, on the runways of New York, Paris, Milan and London, season after season. The Diversity Coalition created by runway alumni Bethann Hardison, Iman, and Naomi Campbell in 2008 was an initiative to expedite inclusion on the runway by deliberately calling out designers who had executed acts of racism on the runway. According to Campbell, the very act of not including black models on the runway is racist. After countless interviews that exposed a group of revered designers in the community, some of them acted on the critique, but the focal point is that we shouldn’t have to guilt-trip, or perform extremes for fashion designers not to be racist.

One year ago, in the Spring semester of 2016, I used an opportunity in a Digital Humanities Praxis course to digitize my frustrations as a black fashion scholar regarding
elements of racism in fashion, specifically on the runway. My two colleagues (Alison Boldero and Nicola Certo) and I created Skin Deep (New York Fashion Week) NYFW as an interactive platform for the public to explore the research we had done. Skin Deep was broken down into three categories: Missing/Messy data, Tokenism, and Racial Categorization. At the project’s core, we were trying to measure the disparities between models of color and their white counterparts during the Autumn/Winter 2016 Fashion season, honing in on New York City (with an proposed expansion to London, Milan, and Paris).

The recent call for inclusion in fashion is a stagnant battle that will take a sincere understanding on how racism affects those who suffer from it. I propose that a sincere understanding of social issues (matched with an acquired social consciousness) will eliminate acts of tokenism (and other racist acts) and sensitize the upper echelons of the fashion world to issues and concerns that also have lasting effects on people who consume and work in the industry. There is a dire need for people of color on the mastheads of the glossy fashion magazines—Vogue, W, Harper’s Bazaar etc.—who can penetrate the often “dated” fashion system, and oversee decisions made on behalf of black and brown bodies (another great example, cultural appropriation).

Kim Jenkins, fashion scholar told me, “It comes down to having more courageous voices in positions of power to contest what is going on. The challenge is that you are asking century-old heritage brands and contemporary luxury brands to be convinced that not only do black bodies matter, but that they can sell something for them. Those brands are certainly not convinced of the latter, despite what consumer marketing statistics can show you. There is a widespread resistance to regarding the black body as beautiful—many designers and executives hide behind the formality that black bodies simply do not convey their aesthetic”
I now feel that it is *my* responsibility as a black fashion scholar to continue to push the conversation into action.
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