

# OUT OF FASHION: RACIAL DIVERSITY

THE NEED FOR MORE RACIAL SENSITIVITY  
IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY



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PWR 1: THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES  
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The same year that Barack Obama won his election as the first African-American President of the United States, New York Fashion Week's 103 runway shows with 2,278 models featured African-American models a mere 5% of the time.<sup>1</sup> Models of color, including black, Asian, and nonwhite Hispanic women, made up about 12% of the total number of models at that Fashion Week in 2008.<sup>2</sup> When America surpassed a historic racial barrier in politics, one of the largest industries in the world refused to represent racial equality.

Fast-forward to today, and the fashion industry is still overwhelmingly "white." The homogeneity is by no means limited to the models onstage but rather permeates throughout the fashion industry. A relatively small number of nonwhite photographers, editors, and designers have reached prominence. Despite this lack of diversity behind the scenes, fashion designers often incorporate vestiges of other cultures into their work. The practice of designers to draw inspiration from various cultures dates back to Paul Poiret; considered a father figure in fashion history who liberated women from the corset, Poiret gained fame through his "exoticized tendencies" and "orientalist fantasies" that came across through his nuanced design of turbans and harem pants in the early 20th century.<sup>3</sup> However, a gray area exists between cultural inspiration and cultural appropriation, in which the reinterpretation of global cultures and ideas can prompt criticism from offended viewers. Recently, misrepresentations of Asian and Native American cultures by Chanel, Urban Outfitters, Victoria's Secret, and H&M have triggered such negative feedback. Thus, a predominately homogenous group of people that appears to run the industry is making judgment calls on diversity that can come across as both unfair and offensive

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart, Dodai. "Fashion Week Runways Were Almost A Total Whitewash." *Jezebel*. N.p., 11 Feb. 2008. Web. 25 Feb. 2014. <<http://jezebel.com/354782/fashion-week-runways-were-almost-a-total-whitewash>>. I will be using MLA citation.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Herald, Koda, and Andrew Bolton. "Paul Poiret (1879–1944)." The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Sept. 2008. Web. 14 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/poir/hd\\_poir.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/poir/hd_poir.htm)>.

to minorities involved. A clear disconnect exists between the controversial images of racial representation that fashion institutions—both companies and magazines—put forward and the lack of diversity among those employed.

The disparity begs the question: is fashion racist? This question has been echoed among contemporary journalists and served as the title of Vicki Woods' story in *Vogue's* July issue in 2008, again the same year as Obama's election. Despite the years of legal progress recognizing civil rights in the Western world, are we failing to recognize and act upon the perpetuation of racism in this massive industry?

It denies common sense to say an international industry can harbor collective, racist intentions. Instead, the fashion industry has maintained a Eurocentric aesthetic since its Parisian origins and the result, whether conscious or not, is racism. Particularly with the advent of the Internet and mass use of technology, fashion design has found a global stage that can be viewed by a multiethnic audience. More than ever, the industry has a responsibility to consider its global audience and make mindful decisions about the representation of diversity on and off the runway. Due to the disconnect between the homogenous industry and its potentially offensive cultural depictions, members of the fashion industry must widely diversify their work environments in order to practice racial equality, to more accurately represent the various cultures of their audience, and to develop more likeable brand reputations.

## A WHITE BACKDROP

A deep irony characterizes the fact that an industry that prides itself on its innovative and forward-thinking nature appears to be taking historical steps backward. In spite of fashion's globalization and consequently rising pedestal before the world's watching eyes, the majority of prominent members in the community are white. *Jezebel*, a website focused on women's matters, calculated the percentage of racial diversity represented among models at New York Fashion Week from 2008 to 2013. As shown in Figure 1, the number of white models has remained the vast majority over the years. The percentage of white models has varied only slightly from 87 percent in 2008 to 82.7 percent in 2013.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1

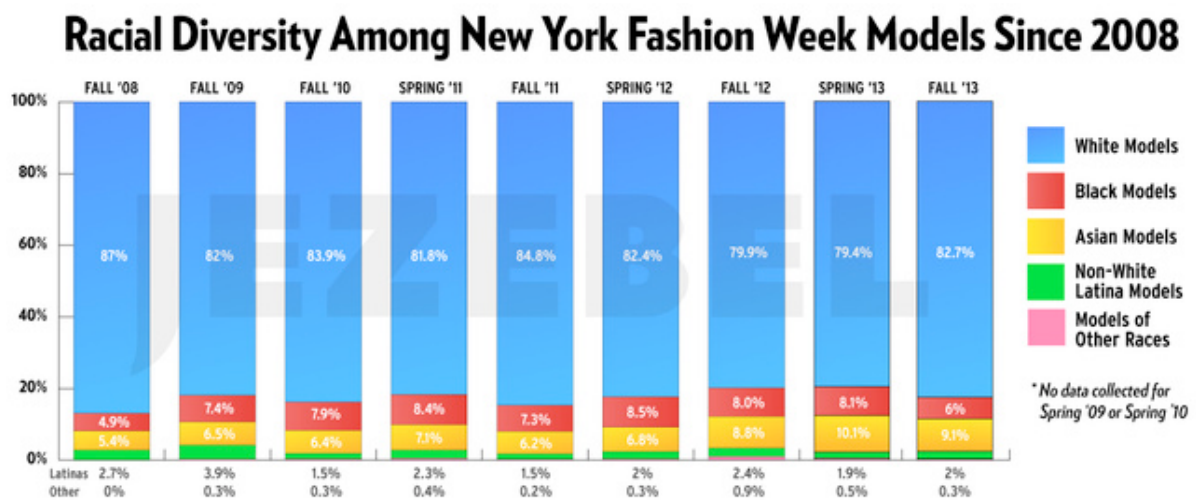


Figure 1. Since New York Fashion Week in Fall 2008, white models have remained the vast majority of models onstage. The percentage of white models has only declined slightly over the years from 87% in 2008 to 82.7% in 2013.

Source: Dries, Kate. "New York Fashion Week Was Chock-Full of White Models. Again." *Jezebel*. N.p., 17 Sept. 2013. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <<http://jezebel.com/new-york-fashion-week-was-chock-full-of-white->

<sup>4</sup> Dries, Kate. "New York Fashion Week Was Chock-Full of White Models. Again." *Jezebel*. N.p., 17 Sept. 2013. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <<http://jezebel.com/new-york-fashion-week-was-chock-full-of-white-models-1326813852>>.

While models may be "the primary ambassadors of color in the fashion industry," lack of diversity can be seen on all sides of the runway if one is truly looking.<sup>5</sup> Data on racial diversity across other aspects of the industry has not been recorded, but multiple insiders have reported the truth in the industry's generally Caucasian appearance. In her *New York Times* article, "Taking Stereotyping to a New Level in Fashion," Amy Spindler states, "The fashion eye is overwhelmingly white, from designers drawing on African and Asian culture (Ralph Lauren, John Galliano, Jean-Paul Gaultier, and Alexander McQueen, to name a few) to those putting the images in magazines."<sup>6</sup> Spindler notes that one black contributing editor for *Vanity Fair* (André Leon Talley), a few well-known Asian photographers, and a few Asian designers make up the extent to which nonwhite leaders in fashion have gained notable recognition in the primarily white industry.<sup>7</sup> Another article by Chase Quinn in *The Grio*, a division of the MSNBC cable channel directed toward African Americans, adds to the list of positions that lack racial diversity. The article expresses a "startling dearth" of black casting agents, publicists, and stylists.<sup>8</sup> Beyond the underrepresentation of ethnic models, a primarily white backdrop lies behind the fashion world.

Along with evident racial inequality, the current homogenous nature of the fashion industry signifies a very real, concerning lack of employment for nonwhite contributors. Nonwhite models must regularly compete for the one or two spots potentially available to them in runway shows. Often, this limited number of spots only demonstrates fashion houses' perfunctory impulse to include minimal racial diversity, a practice known as tokenism. In a

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<sup>5</sup> Spindler, Amy M. "Taking Stereotyping to a New Level in Fashion." *The New York Times*, 3 June 1997. Web. 25 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/03/style/taking-stereotyping-to-a-new-level-in-fashion.html%3E>>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Quinn, Chase. "Fashion Stars Talk Race, Fashion, And The Next Steps Towards Equality." *TheGrio.com*. MSNBC, 19 Sept. 2013. Web. 25 Feb. 2014. <<http://thegrio.com/2013/09/19/fashion-stars-talk-race-fashion-and-the-next-steps-towards-equality/>>.

phone interview with Kelly Cutrone, founder of the eminent PR company People's Revolution and a judge on *America's Next Top Model*, Cutrone said, "I personally think there's nothing worse than a fashion show that uses 20 models, and one dark-skinned girl and one Asian girl. It's more offensive to her beauty and her job [to include her as a token] than not having her in the show." Chanel Iman, a top African-American and Korean supermodel, said in an interview with United Kingdom-based *The Times Magazine* that designers have told her, "We already found one black girl. We don't need you anymore."<sup>9</sup> This blatant exclusion of racial diversity marks a common experience, even that of one of the most renowned models of color.

Iman, along with black model-turned-activist Bethann Hardison and supermodel Naomi Campbell, co-founded The Diversity Coalition in order to hold designers accountable for their colorless runways. In September 2013, The Coalition released a letter to the governing fashion councils in New York, London, Paris, and Milan that ended with a list of "fashion houses guilty of [the] racist act" of using "one or no models of color."<sup>10</sup> The extensive list of these "guilty" fashion houses included dozens of leading designers such as Versace, Céline, Louis Vuitton, Prada, Chanel, BCBG, and many more. Hardison told *The New York Times*, "Modeling is probably the one industry where you have the freedom to refer to people by their color and reject them in their work."<sup>11</sup> As Iman tells *Vogue* in Vicki Woods' "Is Fashion Racist?", "In any other industry ['We're not seeing black models this season'] would be a racist remark, and you would be taken to court for it!"<sup>12</sup> Our 21st century fashion industry does not have fashion-forward

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<sup>9</sup> Teeman, Tim. "Chanel Iman: Modeling, Racism, and Me." *The Times*, 16 Feb. 2013. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/magazine/article3684885.ece>>.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, Julee. "Fashion Designers Accused Of Racism In Letter." *TheHuffingtonPost.com*. The Huffington Post, 06 Sept. 2013. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/06/fashion-designers-racism-letter-bethann-hardison\\_n\\_3880363.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/06/fashion-designers-racism-letter-bethann-hardison_n_3880363.html)>.

<sup>11</sup> Trebay, Guy. "Ignoring Diversity, Runways Fade to White." *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 13 Oct. 2007. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/14/fashion/shows/14race.html?pagewanted=all>>.

<sup>12</sup> Woods, Vicki. "Is Fashion Racist?" *Vogue* July 2008: n. pag. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.vogue.com/magazine/article/is-fashion-racist/#1>>.

sensibilities when it comes to race; rather, behind its pretty appearance, the industry is backtracking to days of less racial equality. Leaders must hire a more diverse palette of models and employees in order to provide equal opportunities for people despite their race.

#### INSPIRATION OR APPROPRIATION?

When designers or magazine editors do embrace moments of diversity, misguided decisions can place the represented cultures in a poor light, one that can even highlight racial stereotypes rather than break them down. This misrepresentation occurs in clothing and accessory design, the portrayal of models of color, and magazine editorials. In addition to the need to hire more diverse models and employees, a more conscientious approach to various cultures overall is necessary. If fashion houses and magazines hire more diverse models and employees, they would have the human resources and different perspectives necessary to take a more conscientious approach to various cultures overall.

As aforementioned, designers have drawn inspiration from different cultures since Poiret's time in the early 20th century. Designers easily gain inspiration from other cultures because these cultures have unique, alluring styles and fabrics that are foreign to the customer. By wearing a culturally inspired garment, customers may vicariously enjoy or appreciate that culture.<sup>13</sup> Yet unlike Poiret's time, a much more interconnected, globalized industry now allows all cultures to watch fashion's evolution. "Fashion" statements become potentially offensive statements. What may serve as inspiration to some can easily come across as offensive to others.

Staggering examples of racial insensitivity abound. From white girls in blackface to minorities represented in subservient roles in editorials, the shocking extent of cultural appropriation exceeds creative license due to its simply high risk of offensiveness. Appropriation

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<sup>13</sup> Mete, Fatma. "The Creative Role of Sources of Inspiration in Clothing Design." *International Journal of Clothing Science and Technology* 18.4 (2006): 278-93. Web. 26 Feb. 2014.

appears in both high fashion and commercial sales. Chanel's recent Pre-Fall "cowboys and Indians" theme sparked controversy, while negative responses to H&M's rainbow headdress

**Figure 2**



*Figure 2.* Dolce & Gabbana's 2013 show displayed controversial "Blackamoor" imagery through figures of black women on earrings and printed on dresses. Ironically, the show of 85 looks did not include one model of color.

Source: London, Bianca. "Azealia Banks Boycotts Dolce & Gabbana's 'Racist' Summer 2013 Collection." *Mail Online*. N.p., 23 Oct. 2012. Web. 10 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2221847/Azealia-Banks-boycotts-Dolce-amp-Gabbanas-racist-summer-2013-collection.html>>.

and ethical borders through their "Go East" collection that featured the scanty "Sexy Little Geisha" outfit. In response to this campaign, Nina Jacinto of *Racialicious* said, "It's a troubling attempt to sidestep authentic representation and humanization of a culture and opt instead for racialized fetishizing against Asian women."<sup>15</sup> In their 2013 spring show, Dolce & Gabbana's collection displayed "Blackamoor" images and figures that harken back to the subservient status

caused the company to pull it off the shelves. After Karlie Kloss wore a leopard print bikini and floor-length Native American headdress in the 2012 Victoria's Secret Fashion Show, writer and tribal attorney Ruth Hopkins criticized the outfit as a "mean-spirited, disrespectful trivialization of my blood ancestry and the proud Native identity I work hard to instill in my children."<sup>14</sup> Victoria's Secret also crossed geographical

<sup>14</sup> Hopkins, Ruth. "Victoria's Secret's Racist Garbage Is Just Asking for a Boycott." *Jezebel*, 12 Nov. 2012. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <<http://jezebel.com/tag/native-american-headdress>>.

<sup>15</sup> Jacinto, Nina. "Victoria's Secret Does It Again: When Racism Meets Fashion." *Racialicious: The Intersection of Race and Pop Culture*. N.p., 6 Sept. 2012. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.racialicious.com/2012/09/06/victorias-secret-does-it-again-when-racism-meets-fashion/>>.



of African Americans but ironically did not incorporate one black model in a show that presented over 85 looks.<sup>16</sup> All of these instances occurred within the last two years.

Beyond racial insensitivity in apparel design, callous choices commonly appear in magazine editorials and designer campaigns. In a 2006 study by Jennifer Millard and Peter Grant that examined the poses of black and white women in fashion magazine photographs, the results showed that black models were significantly more likely to be portrayed in submissive or withdrawn poses, as well as much less likely to be portrayed in sexual poses that displayed their bodies more fully. Comments on sexualized advertisements aside,

a subliminal message of subordination comes across when models are posed "submissively," which for the sake of this study, meant any pose that indicated the physical or psychological lowering of the model in relation to others.<sup>17</sup>

The ability to identify messages of subordination is, unfortunately, quite easy. Magazines commonly leverage racial stereotypes for the sake of photo shoots, but an artistic vision can translate into an offensive sight. When the

**Figure 3**



Figure 3. Dasha Zhukova, editor of *Garage Magazine*, is photographed on top of a contorted, bound black woman, Zhukova's "chair."

Source: Walker, Shaun. "Russian Socialite Sparks Outrage With 'Racist Chair' Photograph." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 21 Jan. 2014. Web. 10 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/21/russian-socialite-zhukova-racist-chair-naked-black-mannequin>>.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, Julee. "Dolce & Gabbana Black Figurine Earrings And Dress, Are They Racist?" *TheHuffingtonPost.com*. The Huffington Post, 26 Sept. 2012. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/26/dolce-and-gabbana-racist-earrings-\\_n\\_1914455.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/26/dolce-and-gabbana-racist-earrings-_n_1914455.html)>.

<sup>17</sup> Millard, Jennifer E. "The Stereotypes of Black and White Women in Fashion Magazine Photographs: The Pose of the Model and the Impression She Creates." *Sex Roles* 54.9-10 (n.d.): 659-73. Web. 9 Mar. 2014.

Russian website *Buro 24/7* published a picture of a fashion editor perched on a "chair," represented by a contorted, half-naked, and bound African-American woman, the website responded to criticism with the statement, "This photograph, which has been published completely out of context, is of an art work intended specifically as a commentary on gender and racial politics."<sup>18</sup> Images shared "out of context" and their intended purposes as mere "works of art" signify two recurring excuses made by industry leaders. However, the constant circulation of images across social media, along with the ease of "copy/paste," means that a photograph's appearance out of its context is nearly inevitable and should even be expected. Claims that photographs are simply artistic expressions are invalidated by the fact that pictures can powerfully express multiple messages; viewers do not have the luxury of always knowing a picture's backstory, but they are rather left to their own interpretations. Magazines have represented dark-skinned models as "shadows," placed African-American models in condescending roles such as maids and slaves, and portrayed Native-looking models as primitive and uncivilized next to apparently more dignified models. A statement in The Diversity Coalition's letter to designers applies to both a lack of diversity on runways and the depiction of cultures in fashion photography: "No matter the intention, the result is racism."<sup>19</sup>

#### WHY WE NEED TO END THE TREND

The trend of racial insensitivity in the fashion industry has far-reaching consequences for both consumers and the industry itself. Moreover, a need for change is time-sensitive; the industry cannot sit back and wait for such a trend to "die out." Greater diversity and a higher

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<sup>18</sup> Walker, Shaun. "Russian Socialite Sparks Outrage With 'Racist Chair' Photograph." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 21 Jan. 2014. Web. 10 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/21/russian-socialite-zhukova-racist-chair-naked-black-mannequin>>.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson, Julee. "Fashion Designers Accused Of Racism In Letter." *TheHuffingtonPost.com*. The Huffington Post, 06 Sept. 2013. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/06/fashion-designers-racism-letter-bethann-hardison\\_n\\_3880363.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/06/fashion-designers-racism-letter-bethann-hardison_n_3880363.html)>.

degree of racial sensitivity would not only help bring about racial equality, but these conscious changes would also alter the narrow images of "beauty" that fashion projects and ultimately help retail brands in the future.

A lack of well-represented diversity yields the fundamental problem of racial inequality. Designers have been known to claim that casting directors do not send them nonwhite models, and casting directors respond that the designers do not want them. This old argument has aged into an obsolete one, as fashion's reach has extended to include viewers and consumers across the globe who can easily watch shows online. Moreover, this back-and-forth claim points to a sense of idleness. When making this argument, designers and casting directors address the lack of diversity, yet they do not hint at any motivation to change it. Riccardo Tisci, a designer at Givenchy applauded for the diversity he brings to marketing, said, "I think [hiring mostly white models] is called laziness. People sometimes think, 'It's easier, we're used to it.'"<sup>20</sup> In spite of Betsey Johnson's frequent, bold incorporation of every neon color into one garment and Alexander McQueen's daring 10-inch Armadillo stilettos, fashion houses seem to remain safely inside their comfort zones when it comes to the core of the outfit—the models themselves.

Others justify the quite colorless runways with the idea that models serve only that purpose: to act as the core on which to display each garment. People contend that runway shows are meant to embody a robotic vibe in which models present the collection uniformly, as if they are clothing hangers or mannequins, so as to keep the audience's attention on the clothing.<sup>21</sup> So, they ask, what does it matter what the model-mannequins look like? It matters, and studies prove it.

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<sup>20</sup> Wilson, Eric. "Fashion's Blind Spot." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 07 Aug. 2013. Web. 11 Mar. 2014. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/08/fashion/fashions-blind-spot.html?\\_r=1&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1394528789-uleEgHXc2jMZZdHrEzVRYg](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/08/fashion/fashions-blind-spot.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1394528789-uleEgHXc2jMZZdHrEzVRYg)>.

<sup>21</sup> Woods, Vicki. "Is Fashion Racist?" *Vogue* July 2008: n. pag. Web. 26 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.vogue.com/magazine/article/is-fashion-racist/#1>>.

First, the conviction to present a collection "uniformly"—with racially uniform models—leads to employment discrimination for nonwhite models. With only a couple spots, if any, open to nonwhite models for runway shows and fewer opportunities available to them, agencies become less willing to hire and invest in these models. A more diversified runway, as well as any workplace in fashion, would simply and significantly bring more racial equality to the industry.

Second, show after show, and page after page, of homogenous faces sends an enduring message of popular culture's definition of beauty, a definition that clearly includes the words "white and thin." The fashion industry's constant projection of images and ideas of "beauty" affects, and even takes a toll on, the global audience members who feel an impulse to use a magazine page as a mirror. In a research study that presented participants with idealized appearances in advertisements, participants who reported greater self-comparisons to the models also reported less satisfaction with their own appearances and lower self-esteem.<sup>22</sup> In another study published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 20- to 50-year-old participants collected ten to twelve images that reflected what high fashion meant to them; qualitative data and interview sessions revealed that dissatisfaction with one's looks can often lead to the manipulation of one's body through cosmetic surgery or eating disorders. In some cases, "[drawing inspiration from the fashion world in order to look good] became an obsession."<sup>23</sup> Exposure to idealized appearances and fashion's consistent standard of beauty has psychological and physical effects on the varied spectrum of viewers. As African-American model Veronica Webb professed, "When you see someone that looks like you, it makes women feel beautiful, and it makes women feel they belong." When exposed daily to mass-produced images of people

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<sup>22</sup> Lennon, Sharron J., Abby Lillethun, and Sandra S. Buckland. "Attitudes Toward Social Comparison as a Function of Self-Esteem: Idealized Appearance and Body Image." *Issue Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal* 27.4 (2009): 379-406. Web. 11 Mar. 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Venkatesh, Alladi, Annamma Joy, John F. Sherry, Jr., and Jonathan Deschenes. "The Aesthetics of Luxury Fashion, Body and Identity Formation." *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 20.4 (2010): 459-70. Web. 11 Mar. 2014.

who look quite different, women, and men for that matter, can instead feel less attractive and estranged.

The narrowly defined, yet widely communicated idea of beauty necessitates more diversity both on and off the runway. "Unfortunately, you do have people in positions of power who do not appreciate an idea of beauty outside of their own," said Kyle Hagler, previous senior executive manager at IMG Models, in Eric Wilson's article in *The New York Times*, "Fashion's Blind Spot."<sup>24</sup> Fashion's current state of homogeneity not only calls for more diversity among the models in front of the cameras, but also for more diversity among the backstage "image makers" who capture the scene and "set the trends that the rest of the industry follows."<sup>25</sup> Edward Enninful, the fashion and style editor at *W Magazine*, mentioned these image makers in a discussion with *The New York Times* in which he said, "We need more diverse people working in all facets of the industry."<sup>26</sup> The influence and ranging perspectives of more racially diverse employee—from layout editors to photographers to stylists—would help fashion houses and magazines to give beauty a more culturally inclusive definition.

Moreover, ending the trend of homogeneity will economically and socially benefit brands and magazines. Some brands and magazines have maintained that, because most of their customers are white, white models generate greater sales. But history and research reveal the error in this argument. The possibility that fashion labels and magazines are finding success right now does not mean they would be unsuccessful if they were to reflect more diversity. Runways have not always been so homogenous; in fact, renowned designers among the likes of Yves Saint Laurent and Hubert de Givenchy staged incredibly more diverse shows from the 1970s through

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<sup>24</sup> Wilson, Eric. "Fashion's Blind Spot." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 07 Aug. 2013. Web. 11 Mar. 2014. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/08/fashion/fashions-blind-spot.html?\\_r=1&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1394528789-uleEgHXc2jMZZdHrEzVRYg](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/08/fashion/fashions-blind-spot.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1394528789-uleEgHXc2jMZZdHrEzVRYg)>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

the mid-1990s. J. Alexander, a judge on *America's Next Top Model*, recalled, "Years ago, runways were almost dominated by black girls."<sup>27</sup> In contrast to modern appeals, these designers maintained their success. Recent research conducted by Ben Barry, a modeling agent and professor of Equity, Inclusivity and Diversity at Ryerson's School of Fashion, examined the influence of diverse models in fashion advertisements on women's consumer patterns. The results, published by *Elle* magazine, suggest that consumers are more likely to make a purchase when they identify with the clothing models. These findings indicate that brands' reflection of more diversity could resonate with a wider range of consumers and generate more sales.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond the economic benefits, greater diversity would reap significant social benefits for fashion brands and magazines. The increasing pressure from journalists, consumers, and efforts like The Diversity Coalition hold companies publicly accountable for their levels of diversity. As the pressure rises, fashion labels and magazines that continue to lack diversity put their brand images at risk. Homogeneity will have the opposite effect of whitening companies' reputations; instead, the global audience's outspoken criticism will taint brands' reputations, not to mention legal records. Multiple brands have faced lawsuits on account of racial insensitivity, as Urban Outfitters did in 2012 when the Navajo Nation sued the company for its new products like the "Navajo Print Fabric Wrapped Flask" and "Navajo Hipster Panty." As the globalization of the industry creates a more visible interchange of cultures, powerful measures are necessary to check the potential offensiveness or inequality in decisions that regard race. In other words, Victoria's Secret's "Sexy Little Geisha" outfit and the runway show's number of nonwhite models must be

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<sup>27</sup> Sinclair, Demi. "Racial Diversity on the Runway." *The Business of Fashion*. N.p., 14 Apr. 2013. Web. 11 Mar. 2014. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/22/style/22iht-22runway.8007687.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/22/style/22iht-22runway.8007687.html?_r=0)>.

<sup>28</sup> VanderMaas, Johanna. "Models of Diverse Ages, Races and Sizes Will Help Fashion Houses, Designers Increase Sales." Ryerson University, 31 July 2012. Web. 13 Mar. 2014. <[http://www.ryerson.ca/news/media/General\\_Public/20120731\\_rn\\_barry.html](http://www.ryerson.ca/news/media/General_Public/20120731_rn_barry.html)>.

viewed from a racial lens on the part of each company. Brands that internally embody racial representation among their employees possess this racial lens—this collective, wider perspective—to halt the production of harmful ideas.

#### CONCLUSION: DIVERSIFYING THE FASHION WORLD, REPRESENTING THE WORLD

"Consciousness" is the word Bethann Hardison used when I asked her about the first necessary step toward a more racially aware fashion industry. In our phone interview, she said, "People get into habits, and habits have to be broken." She speaks to the idea that the fashion industry largely shares a habit to exclude diversity. Co-founder of The Diversity Coalition and among the first African-American models who had an insider's view when runways' diversity declined, Hardison is one of the most qualified leaders in the world to speak on the subject of race in fashion. Since the 80s, she has led conferences and campaigns to bring more attention to the colorless runways, and she has succeeded in doing so. New York Fashion Week in September 2013 saw several design houses add a few more models of colors, even up to four or five, and *Vogue's* January 2014 issue unveiled advertisements and editorials with a newsworthy increase in models of color, as shared by Julee Wilson, the Style & Beauty Editor at *The Huffington Post*.<sup>29</sup> Hardison called *Vogue's* January issue a "brilliant example of organic diversity."<sup>30</sup> Some members in the industry have made small steps toward more diversity and prove the possibility of future strides.

Still, greater diversity across the board—not just on the runway—is crucial to break the industry's apparent habit of homogeneity. Industry members must "walk the walk" of promoting inclusivity off the runway, as well. As Edward Enninful told *The New York Times*, "The fashion

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<sup>29</sup> Wilson, Julee. "Bethann Hardison Continues Push For Racial Diversity On The Runway, Sends New Letter." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 05 Feb. 2014. Web. 12 Mar. 2014.  
<[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/05/bethann-hardison-letter-fashion-diversity\\_n\\_4732209.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/05/bethann-hardison-letter-fashion-diversity_n_4732209.html)>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

industry needs to breed a whole different way of thinking."<sup>31</sup> True consciousness of cultural diversity will only result from a widespread effort on the part of the entire industry. In order to ensure that various races are represented more often and more accurately, fashion houses and magazines must bring diverse members to all areas and departments within their organizations. I have included suggested guidelines for taking a conscious approach to racial diversity in Appendix A.

With more equitably represented runways and work environments, fashion houses and magazines will need and be able to use their diverse employee bases to make more conscientious decisions over the morality of design and editorial ideas. Cultural inspiration will garner appreciation, rather than offended viewers and pricy lawsuits. Consumers will be able to see themselves in the clothing and will be more likely to buy. Companies and magazines will develop more appealing brand images and reputations. As fashion steps on a higher platform and global stage, the fashion industry has a profound responsibility to consider and represent its diverse audience inside-and-out—through the industry's inside community and outward image.

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<sup>31</sup> Wilson, Eric. "Fashion's Blind Spot." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 07 Aug. 2013. Web. 11 Mar. 2014. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/08/fashion/fashions-blind-spot.html?\\_r=1&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1394528789-uIeEgHXc2jMZZdHrEzVRYg](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/08/fashion/fashions-blind-spot.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1394528789-uIeEgHXc2jMZZdHrEzVRYg)>.



## TAKING A CONSCIOUS APPROACH TO RACIAL DIVERSITY IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY: A GUIDE

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Modern technology has allowed the fashion industry to reach a more varied audience across the world than ever before. "Every culture is watching," wrote Amy Spindler, former style editor of *The New York Times*. More than ever, industry members have a responsibility to consider its multiethnic audience and make mindful decisions about the representation of diversity both on and off the runway. The following is a brief guide of the ways in which fashion houses and magazines can take a conscious approach to racial inclusivity.

1) Diversify the models included in advertisements, editorials and on the runway to represent a balance of cultures.

a. This will diversify the largely homogenous image of beauty that the industry sends through its current majority of Caucasian models.

i. In turn, women and men will be more likely to be satisfied with their own appearances, as well as less likely to physically modify their appearances through cosmetic surgery or unhealthy eating disorders.

b. Because a greater variety of viewers will be able to identify with the models wearing the clothes, viewers will be more likely to make purchases. Research on consumer patterns by Ben Barry of the Ryerson School of Fashion proved the idea that greater diversity among models would generate greater sales.

c. The Diversity Coalition—an effort by supermodels Bethann Hardison, Naomi Campbell, and Chanel Iman to publicize the need for diversity among models—provided a list of specific guidelines to Diane von Furstenberg and the Council of Fashion Designers of America:

i. "Ask model agencies to include and send models of color when casting. Do not assume agents will automatically do so. It's good for them to hear the interest and important to see what models of color are available."

ii. "Request models of color every season and not be limited to Spring/Summer collections and hesitate when it comes to Fall/Winter collections."

iii. "Be open minded to models of color. Make an effort to add diversity to your lineup. It affects how we see things globally and how we are seen as an industry."

2) Diversify the entire work environment to include more nonwhite contributors in every department.

a. More diverse designers, editors, photographers, casting agents, publicists, stylists, and more will bring multiple perspectives to the work room and provide the human resources necessary to take a conscientious approach to various cultures.

3. Distinguish between inspiration and appropriation in apparel design, advertisements, and editorials.

a. When drawing inspiration from an unfamiliar culture for apparel design, ad campaigns, or editorials, do outside research to ensure the product does not have the potential to be offensive to that culture.

i. Encourage the outspoken opinions of co-workers who are affiliated with or would know more about a certain culture. Ask questions and create a collaborative environment.

b. Consider the 3 S's: source, significance (or sacredness), and similarity. Susan Scafidi, Fordham University Law professor and author of *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in America*, provided questions to help distinguish between offensive appreciation and positive inspiration:

i. Source: "Has the source community either tacitly or directly invited you to share this particular bit of its culture, and does the community as a whole have a history of harmful exploitation?"

ii. Significance: "What's the cultural significance of the item—is it just an everyday object or image, or is it a religious artifact that requires greater respect?"

iii. Similarity: "How similar is the appropriated element to the original—a literal knockoff, or just a nod to a color scheme or silhouette?"

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