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A modern analysis of corporate inequity: Blackness and the Fashion Industry

Ostentatious apparel, top tier fabrics and extravagant design; Such striking characteristics typically come to people's mind when thinking about Fashion. The high-end garment industry is indeed subject to a plethora of hallmarks in today's globalized world. It is one of the most prominent creative industries. As a capitalist business, Fashion ineluctably has inequalities in its core functioning. One might wonder which sort of injustices take place in this market. Well, it has all to do with culture. Clothes incarnate characteristics of modernity, and of culture itself. Thus, cultural influences shape the face of the clothing market today. More precisely, ethnicity and heritage play key roles in this business. Among the broad spectrum of cultural influences, one particularly stands out: Black and African American culture. However, Black culture is yet to be credited for its widespread influence on the Fashion industry today. Moreover, as a predominantly upper-class and white sector, it provides unequal opportunities to Black people willing to prosper in this field. We will therefore analyze the ongoing issues within the industry in our modern era. First, we will discuss the disparities on a corporate standpoint, analyzing problems such as systemic racism. Then, this article will focus on the controversial representation of the Black body in luxury clothing. In addition, a part will be dedicated to cultural appropriation. Finally, we will examine various perspectives of improvement and steps which are being taken to solve this unethical issue.

First, a lack of Black representation in high-ranking corporate positions in the Fashion industry is easily noticeable. This paradoxical situation is clearly depicted by Vanessa Friedman in her NY Times article: Fashion's Racial divide". Indeed, powerful quotes from Black entrepreneurs stand out in the paper. For instance, Mellody Hobson, a renowned African American businesswoman,

states the following: "It is a paradox, really. African-Americans have generally been the purveyors of style in our country for much of our history, and yet African-American designers have such trouble breaking out and creating businesses of any scale." (Friedman 5). How do such contradictory circumstances appear? Well, as usual, money is partly responsible. Black households historically possess less financial capital than white ones. Social determinism is therefore an obstacle for young aspiring Black designers or Fashion executives. It is particularly frustrating to observe this. It means that due to society's dysfunction, brilliant talent is wasted. On the other hand, the Caucasian youth benefits from a virtuous cycle of finances, allowing it to develop the necessary skills to attain important corporate positions in the apparel industry. As Simon Collins declares in Friedman's article: ""Sometimes I wonder: Are we training people to be Caucasian designers?" (Friedman 3). A disparity as strong as this one can obviously not be hidden by Fashion corporations. A wide variety of Luxury businesses try to promote inclusivity in their recruiting process. This can be seen with the choice of runway models, PR agents or even fashion consultants. Nevertheless, the tactics that these companies try to implement remain inherently discriminatory.

Effectively, tokenism is commonplace in today's industry. It is defined as the "practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to be inclusive to members of minority groups, especially by recruiting people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of racial or sexual equality within a workforce". While it is true that such a concept cannot be considered as structural racism, it still conveys racist tendencies, in a rather subtle manner. You might be wondering how it is implemented in luxury fashion. In her essay titled Researching diversity and representation of race in contemporary fashion editorials, Lise Charlotte Lehwald from Malmo university accurately depicts the situation with the example of model castings: "the industry sometimes even uses these 'token' models by emphasizing their difference and using their 'otherness' and 'exoticism' in over-accentuated ways thus misrepresenting not only the model, but anyone who identifies with her race and ethnicity". (Lehwald 8). Here is an example of implicit post-colonial discourse. Our exploration of the topic just reached an important step, as we clearly discover that systemic racism remains common in the industry.

Another strongly accurate example of tokenism can be witnessed in one of the most hyped French Luxury brands: "Jacquemus". This brand is famous for its diverse models on the runway. Ironically, Simon Porte Jacquemus, founder of the fashion label, often takes pride in such diversity, as the models are displayed to the world. However, the reality behind the scenes is sadly the opposite. For instance, the cast for his Spring Summer 21 collection was considered as a breath of fresh air in the industry. The cast was mainly comprised of Black models wearing vivid colors with eccentric fabrics. In practical terms, this was just an act of typical performative activism, as we learned that the corporate team organizing the show was completely white. Thus, the French designer simply used a diverse cast for a seemingly progressive or positive representation of his brand, while not one person of color was hired at a corporate level position. Overall, this combination of tokenism and lack of representation in superior positions contributes to the systemic racist narrative of the industry. The latter is reluctant to give a chance to Black individuals, even though they deserve full merit.

Where does this reluctance find its roots? The more we progress in our analysis, the more we discover a paradoxical feeling regarding the Black community and their value in the Fashion industry. It seems as if Black people are adored for their aesthetically pleasing look, but this special appearance is also detrimental to them in a way. We could argue that the distinction between negrophilia and negrophobia is extremely subtle in luxury clothing. Evidence of simultaneous adoration and contempt for Blackness can be traced back to the 1970s in South Africa. The article The Afro Look and global black consciousness written by Tanisha Ford provides this evidence. Indeed, this peer reviewed article examines the contribution of the African Diaspora to Black Fashion in the 1970s. Ford argues that South African garments and Black beauty features were both adored and rejected by the Caucasian part of the population at the time. This quote is particularly and relevant to the topic of the Black body: "In many ways, Princess Elizabeth's photograph in the Life article symbolized the world's simultaneous fetishization of and repulsion toward "real" blackness" (Ford 3).

This peculiar obsession of the aesthetic of the Black body is also prominent in today's luxury apparel environment. A high number of polemics burst after every Fashion Week, as white designers tend to replicate black body features on their runway clothing. For instance, the famous Italian brand Gucci has faced numerous negative feedbacks over its products. In Autumn 2018, their

collection featured a wool balaclava (a turtleneck) with a mouth cut and an exaggerated bright red lip contour. It sparked backlash for its resemblance to blackface caricatures almost immediately. As a result, the brand made the announcement that it would be hiring a global director for diversity and inclusion, as well as five new designers around the world for its Rome office, following the incident. We now witness that in order for things to evolve, controversy needs to appear first. Thus, we could argue that in today's fashion industry, conservatism is deeply embedded.

Furthermore, fetishization in the industry today is linked to another widely known racist process, which is none other than colorism. It is defined as prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group. Fashion enthusiasts throughout the globe has noticed that the ongoing trend nowadays clearly oriented towards lighter complexions. This means that dark skinned Black models have statistically less chance of being chosen for editorials, photo shoots or runway shows. The article Is fashion's newfound "inclusivity "only skin deep written by Anita Sengupta pictures the rise of multiracial models, arguing that these light skinned models ``have become the embodiment of nonconformity, a visual representation of the street-casting ethos and the principle of diversity in casting at large." (Sengupta 1). Again, and not surprisingly, diversity is used as a marketing tool aiming to satisfy the capitalist fashion structure.

After examining systemic racism and how Blackness is displayed, now is the time to discuss the core part of our thesis: culture. In what ways do people from African descent are prejudiced in terms of culture when it comes to high end garments? Do not look for a complex answer, as it again is linked to a commonplace racist process called cultural appropriation. This appropriation mainly takes place during runway shows. In fashion, famous designer brands have the duty to produce more than four collections per year. Each collection is then displayed to the public during Fashion week, the Parisian one being the most important one. A striking example of cultural theft is the one of Stella McCartney in her 2017 spring collection. This woman's collection featured graphic dresses with traditional Ankara Print, without giving any deserved credit to West and Central Africa. This given situation is indeed problematic, as it is essentially the concrete emanation of plagiarism, with an added layer of denigration. The famous designer defended herself, stating that her print choice was a way of celebrating West African heritage through "cultural appreciation". The word choice is of utmost importance here. Nuancing offensive terms is commonplace in the fashion industry, and Black people substantially suffer from such deceptive rhetorical tools. The number of polemics stated in this article

speak for themselves, and we ultimately notice that fetishization and cultural appropriation in the Fashion industry can coexist. For instance, hair braiding is another example of heritage denigration. Laney Alspaugh's scholarly essay Is Cultural Appropriation Braided into Fashion Coverage? An Examination of American Magazines soughts to analyze the cultural appropriation of cornrows within the context of three US magazines between 2013 and 2018. Such publications demonstrate the underlying issue. The most important information to note is that the perception of cornrows when it is worn by white models is viewed as "eccentric" (Alspaugh 9). On the other hand, black models wearing the same Afro-Caribbean coiffure are considered "ghetto" and "unprofessional" (Alspaugh 10).

After witnessing such blatant discriminatory processes, you might be wondering if the Fashion industry will ever be subject to change in terms of inclusivity and diversity. To answer this highly anticipated question I will quote Friedman's Essay: "Yes, there are signs that things may finally be changing-or that fashion may at least be waking up to its own homogeneous reality" (Friedman 6). First, the main tool which can be used to raise awareness on this subject is obviously education. As a society, we must change the narrative through effective teaching. For instance, the Fashion institute of technology (FIT) has seen its African American enrollment explode since 2009. This allows students to develop their portfolio, thus battling the obstacle of social determinism we discussed in the beginning. Plus, we could talk about the most prestigious fashion design school, Parson, creating a Scholars program to promote inclusivity in the application process.

Finally, successful black fashion entrepreneurs are paving the way for the youth to excel in the field. Virgil Abloh, the first Black man appointed to the position of Men's artistic director of Louis Vuitton has recently launched a $1 million scholarship fund to support Black American creatives. Furthermore, Abloh is making direct changes in the "Establishment" itself. Since his beginning in 2018 at Louis Vuitton, he has designed collections taking both elements of traditional French "Haute couture" and Black streetwear apparel. He is effectively changing the face of luxury by implementing Afro heritage to high end fashion.

To sum up, our analytical journey of the fashion industry and its issues regarding BIPOC comes to an end. One day will come where Black excellence will be fully understood and appreciated. By then, it is our duty to support creatives of any horizons, as the power of cultural unity is immense.

Works Cited

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