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Style Watch: Blackface Edition

Rashida Aluko-Roberts
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

The above quote is from a statement/apology offered by Sebastian Kim, a photographer, whose recent editorial, “African Queen,” which featured a 16-year-old white female made to appear black, was marred with controversy. According to the photographer, dousing a young white female in deep bronze, accessorizing her in elaborate head wraps and heavy jewels (symbols that are often associated with Africa), was in no way an attempt to depict what an “African queen” looks like. Rather, his spread was attempting to showcase “the beauty aesthetic of his shoot” by using a “tanned or golden skin” model. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, African women, modeling, blackface, African Queen

Disciplines

African American Studies | American Popular Culture | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Race and Ethnicity | Sociology | Sociology of Culture | Women's Studies

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Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/surge/) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

STYLE WATCH: BLACKFACE EDITION

March 12, 2013

"We at no point attempted to portray an African women by painting her skin black. We wanted a tanned and golden skin to be showcased as part of the beauty aesthetic of this shoot. It saddens me that people would interpret this as a mockery of race."

The above quote is from a statement/apology offered by Sebastian Kim, a photographer, whose recent editorial, "African Queen," which featured a 16-year-old white female made to appear black, was marred with controversy. According to the photographer, dousing a young white female in deep bronze, accessorizing her in elaborate head wraps and heavy jewels (symbols that are often associated with Africa), was in no way an attempt to depict what an "African queen" looks like. Rather, his spread was attempting to showcase "the beauty aesthetic of his shoot" by using a "tanned or golden skin" model.



The issue of "black face" and other racially insensitive portrayals of persons of color in the fashion industry are becoming more commonplace. You can find a Victoria's Secret model wearing next to nothing clad in a Native American style headdress. Or you can find Sports Illustrated using "natives" and "exotic people" as backdrops for their annual calendar. Not to mention the endless stream of "black face" editorials that grace magazines. The list goes on, and it is disheartening to know that these images are becoming more widespread and are seen as artistic and edgy instead of offensive and stereotyped.

Individually, the pictures mean very little. However, what drives the messages to the forefront are the descriptions and titles that perpetuate stereotyped or offensive images. In an interview with ABC News, former model Cynthia Bailey said she was initially dismissive of the spread when she thought the image was that of a bronzed black model. However, like many, she took offense when she realized that the model was in fact white, and that she was being described as an "African Queen." Another blogger, Laura Beck [shared the same sentiments](#):

"Maybe it's because the magazine just couldn't find a black model? Maybe there are none, and it's just not a profession that appeals to anyone but young, tall, skinny, white girls? They're probably the only ones who enjoy traveling around the world and getting paid tons of money to be pretty."

The message that images like these send to the group or individuals being portrayed is very demeaning. Seeing a white model appearing as black or African perpetuates the idea that the only person good enough to represent you is white. Using "natives" or "exotic" people as backdrop for pictorials that feature western models sends the idea that these individuals are nothing more than props undeserving of a feature photo. It is dehumanizing and just down right disrespectful.

These messages also contribute to the flawed thinking of the individuals being used to endorse these ideas. At 16, the young model used for this shoot is already being conditioned to believe in the superiority of her race. She is led to feel indifferent about the racial significance of these actions, encouraging her to not acknowledge the privileged position she resides in within our society. Using her to represent what an "African Queen" looks like only furthers her belief that the blacks and African women who are struggling for representation in the fashion industry are not qualified to represent their own groups. And this struggle for a positive and fair representation of persons of color exists well beyond fashion industry; it resides in television shows, movies, music, academia and many other mediums.

Maybe Mr. Kim's intentions were innocent and did not set out to make a mockery of anyone, or maybe he's been conditioned to accept his privilege and superiority. But to say the model was intended to portray a "tanned or golden skin" individual is problematic. His vision shows a lack of sensitivity to an issue that is quite prevalent in the fashion industry and throughout the world. I am no expert in tanning or bronzing, however, countless hours of Jersey Shore leads me to conclude that even Snooki and her crew, known for their incessant tanning habits, could never achieve Mr. Kim's standard of a "tanned or golden skin" individual.

In short, "blackface is only okay if you have a blackface."

Rashida Aluko-Roberts '15
Staff Writer

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