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## The Attack on Blackness in Fashion

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## The Attack on Blackness in Fashion

### Abstract

This paper identifies specific and general instances of anti-black sentiment in the fashion industry across the Western world, in order to demonstrate how the actions and rhetoric of this industry equates to an all out assault on blackness and black culture, despite the contemporary acceptance and commodification of some of its elements. Next, an analysis is conducted into the overall effect this trend has on black life and psyche in today's world. Finally, the paper suggests specific changes that must be made in order to reverse and correct this trend.

### Keywords

racism in fashion, cosmetics industry, collective mobilization

### Disciplines

Africana Studies | Fashion Business | Women's Studies

### Comments

Written for AFS 250: Black Feminism in Film & Hip Hop

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The Attack on Blackness in Fashion

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## Introduction

In America and across the world, cultural appropriation of traditionally African customs, practices, and presentations is on the rise. It seems, more frequently than ever, it has become acceptable to commodify African culture for the sake of aesthetic flare and profit, as things like dreadlocks and hip-hop fashion in a society that equates 'blackness' with 'coolness'. Some people argue that this appropriation can have positive effects on the position of the black community; after all, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. However, the unfortunate truth is that this is simply not the case. Instead, African cultural appropriation is an exploitative process that does nothing to advance the plight of the African in Western and Latin American society - evidenced by the fact that the fashion industry has picked and chosen particular 'trendy' parts of African culture to commodify while continuing their ruthless campaign against all other forms of blackness. The fashion industry continues to teach black people, young and old, men and women, that their hair, skin, and general features are relatively undesirable in comparison to those of white people through their advertisements, products, and actions. This attack on blackness and black culture, which continues to wage on in the fashion industry, must stop before its negative effects further damage the psyche and social position of black people everywhere.

This paper will identify specific and general instances of anti-black sentiment in the fashion industry across the Western world, in order to demonstrate how the actions and rhetoric of this industry equates to an all out assault on blackness and black culture, despite the contemporary acceptance and commodification of some of its elements. Once this has been deduced, an analysis will be conducted into the overall effect this trend has on black life and

psyche in today's world. Finally, this paper will suggest specific changes that must be made in order to reverse and correct this trend if one is shown.

### An Industry-wide Assault

Anti-black sentiment seems to permeate all areas and levels of today's fashion industry. Many of the most influential artists and designers do not shy away from overt and subliminal displays of anti-black sentiment, and many more who supposedly champion black culture do so in a very non-inclusive and single-minded way. Millions of products - from hair care, to skin care, to self care - are sold every day that seem to spread a similar message that blackness is a barrier in the way of beauty that needs to be fixed and hidden from the public eye. Instead of displaying the full array of african bodies, faces, and tones, fashion companies and pop-culture embrace tokenism, while continuing to underrepresent black people and culture in comparison to their white counterparts. The subjugation and unfair treatment of black culture exists in almost every facet of the fashion industry - a social force that must come to an end immediately.

### *The Gatekeepers of Fashion*

Racists are everywhere, and the fashion industry is not without their fair share of stylists and designers who accommodate this evil line of thinking. Even in the highest positions in the fashion industry, racism exists - a phenomenon which can and does have catastrophic and lasting negative impacts on the plight of black people and the African culture everywhere.

A systematic marginalization of black people has taken place within the ranks of some of the highest authorities of fashion. Black artists made up less than 10% of designers at the last New York Fashion Week - one of the most prominent institutions of high fashion. (Segran,

2018) Even less representation exists within the Council of Fashion Designers of America - one of the most prominent trade organizations in the industry - in which only 3% of members are black. (Segran, 2018) This underrepresentation of black artistry in the highest levels of the fashion industry contributes to the general misrepresentation, and exploitation, of black culture.

There has been recent progress in this field of issue, as several black people have risen to prominence in the fashion world over the past few years. For instance, Virgil Abloh recently became the first black man to take on the role of men's artistic director at Louis Vuitton.

Additionally, Edward Enniful became the first black editor-in-chief of British *Vogue*, and *Vogue* also appointed Tyler Mitchell to oversee the photo shooting for the cover of one of their issues - marking the first time in history a black person has occupied this position. (Newman, 2017)

However, all of these movements have been slow, and met with heavy resistance. For instance, Tyler Mitchell was only given the spot of chief photographer for the issue because Beyonce - who was prominently featured in the *Vogue* issue - demanded his inclusion, threatening to withhold her likeness after the fashion company initially refused. (Newman, 2017) Additionally, despite this progress, there remains the issue of massive underrepresentation which threatens the position of black culture in the industry and subjects it to the risk of further abuse.

Perhaps worse than the underrepresentation of black artists is the existence of abject racism stemming from some of the most institutionalized and highly respected names within the industry. Several luxury brands have recently released bigoted and insensitive items and products that display their designer's misconceived and racist notions of what is acceptable in today's culture. In late 2018, the Italian fashion company Prada released the "Pradamalia" collection, which displayed an array of products that featured easily identifiable blackface caricatures.

(Pham, 2019) Gucci - perhaps the most prolific fashion company in American urban and hip-hop culture (which is not synonymous with 'black' culture) - has been criticized for their inclusion of black face in their designs, including in a ski mask turtleneck outlined with red lips. (Urquhart, 2019) Even more egregious, the goliath retail company H&M met widespread criticism for their creation of a hoodie with the phrase "I'm The Coolest Monkey in the Jungle" embroidered on it. To add further insult, the company advertised this hoodie by donning a young black boy with the hoodie. Not every clearly racist pattern was created to be intentionally racist - especially since the issue of underinclusion of black artists in the design process of most major fashion companies will inherently lead to ignorance of what is considered offensive. However, the sheer volume of these types of violations indicates a racist sentiment and rhetoric that exists within the fashion community that African culture and features can be tokenized, commodified, and even mocked for the sake of profit. Although these companies have been repeatedly forced to remove these images and publicly apologize for their blunders, this does not stop them from continually showing their refusal to change their racist ways, and almost never hold the artists responsible accountable for their actions.

The most powerful and established institutions of fashion and pop-culture thus show their racist tendencies through their refusal to include black artists and designers in the creative process and their perpetuation of racist imagery and rhetoric in their designs. These companies and organizations constitute the gatekeepers of fashion and control what the public considers fashionable, cool, and acceptable. Because of the massive amount of influence these institutions have over public perception, if there is to be any decrease of racist sentiment in fashion, it must come from the top.

*Advertisement*

As previously stated, racist sentiment permeates every facet of fashion, and the advertising sector of the industry is far from untouched by this abhorrent theme. From runways, to billboards, to the living room television, fashion advertisements continually project racist and controlling imagery of what is to be considered acceptable and fashionable, and what is to be considered ugly and unacceptable.

Just as underrepresentation of black and African artists exists in the design process of the fashion industry, so too does it exist in the area of advertisement. At last year's New York Fashion Week runway display, only 15% of the models that walked the runway were black. This may seem like an astoundingly low figure, and that would be correct if it wasn't actually several times higher than the average for most fashion shows and runway exhibits. On average, black models make up only 6% of models on the runway during the fashion month calendar. (Newman, 2017) This chronic underrepresentation persists in other mediums of fashion advertising - such as in magazine fashion advertisements, where black models comprise less than one-third of one percent of the models found among the pages of several genres of Time, Vogue, and several other magazines.

This underrepresentation in fashion advertising has multiple causes, a major one being the tokenism that exists within the industry. In a world where inclusivity is championed as desirable by the general consumer, fashion brands will make concessions to include some black models in their advertising campaigns to give off the idea that they are progressive and 'woke'. Fashion companies will do this, so long as it doesn't upset the status quo. Rhetoric such as 'we already have a black girl' is frequently used to justify the lack of diversity in fashion advertising. (The Spinoff, 2018) This most minimal form of inclusion can be used to further justify cultural



appropriation and other forms of racism - after all, how can a product or design be anti-black if it is being used or worn by a black model? Tokenism allows for these feats of mental gymnastics that allow fashion companies to allude fair criticism while doing nothing to actually promote inclusivity and impede the proliferation of anti-black racism.

Even when black models are included in fashion advertising, they are often only included so long as they fit into a particular prescribed image of blackness deemed acceptable to the general public. Although the average model deals with similar issues - such as standards of weight, height, and beauty - black models deal with this on a much more acute and marginalizing level. Black models in the industry have generally reached consensus that the quickest way to be out of a job in fashion advertising is to exude any degree of physical normalcy. In most advertising campaigns that include black models, the entire concept of their inclusion is intended to place emphasis on the otherness that distinguishes them from their white counterparts. Thus, features that are seen as 'exotic' or 'urban' - such as extremely dark skin or thick, long, dread-locks - are often over-accentuated in advertisements. Even though features of African or black culture are highlighted in these campaigns, they are done so in a way that is exclusionary of the majority of black models, and perpetuates the tokenism that exists in the industry. The accentuation of certain black body features are also hand selected by the fashion industry, while others are acutely oppressed. Typically 'black' features such as broad-noses and 'big' frizzy hair are rarely featured in advertisements, which exudes the idea that these features of blackness are undesirable and unacceptable.

Conversely, other advertising campaigns serve to reduce the prevalence of objectively black features by whitewashing black models. One particularly overt example of this can be seen

in L’Oreal’s 2008 cosmetic advertisement featuring the music phenom Beyoncé. (University of Colorado, n.d.) The pictures included in the advertising campaign, when compared to pictures of Beyoncé outside of advertising, were clearly different from her natural look. Further investigation found that L’Oreal had altered Beyoncé’s appearance to appear lighter and whiter than her normal self. In the ads, Her skin is nearly white and her hair is almost blond, which is clearly different from her real-life brown skin and hair. This whitewashing advertisement campaign, and the numerous others like it, give the impression that to be white is to be the abject standard of beauty, and all other skin tones ought to strive to achieve this pigmentation.

Other advertisements serve to popularize and commodify aspects of black or African culture in a way that separates them from black people through cultural appropriation. For instance, in the Spring/Summer fashion season of 2017, Marc Jacobs sent down a majority of white models down the runway in multi-colored faux dreadlocks - a hairstyle artistically and culturally attributed to black people and black culture. This came just months after the company publicly voiced their commitment to the idea that diversity should be seen as an asset, rather than a burden in the fashion industry. (TFL, 2020) This is just one example of how the fashion industry as a whole uses the concept of cultural appropriation to take and profit from black culture while refusing to include black people in their advertisements.

### *Products*

Racist tendencies of the fashion industry clearly seep into the patterns and designs of their clothing and accessory products. However, there are a number of ways in which racism subliminally permeates many other types of products - particularly in the hair and cosmetic industry. The functions of these products, and the sentiments that exude, preach the idea that

inherently black facial and anatomical features are undesirable and should be hidden or modified to be more in line with pre-existing notions of beauty.

Maya Angelou once stated that, white is the standard of beauty that women of color cannot attain, and the cosmetic industry clearly exemplifies and perpetuates this sentiment. (University of Colorado, n.d.) One of the ways the cosmetic industry privileges white consumers over consumers of color is through limiting the accessibility of cosmetic products that pair with darker skin tones. the proportion of makeup for white skin tones continues to exceed those produced for black and brown skin tones by major cosmetic companies like MAC, Maybelline, Covergirl, and Bobbi Brown. A study of some of the most popular brands in the makeup industry has found that, of all the skin shades put out in a foundation line - generally containing between 20-30 different tones - only five or six will have an objectively dark pigmentation. (Hope, 2016)

Compounding the negative effects this lack of inclusion has on black self-image is the existence of a wide array of skin-whitening products. Products that make claims about their ability to lighten the skin of the user have been around since the 1940s, and have not changed much in their rhetoric. (Lucky, 1940) The general idea is that whiteness is the preferred hue of skin, and those who do not have that pigmentation need to buy products that will give them that look. Products sold by major skin-care companies like Ulta and MAC offer these services to their dark-skinned customer base, who have succumbed to the racist ideology these products have promoted.

While the cosmetic industry features some of the most heinous abuses of whitewashing, the hair-care industry features similar elements that outline a particularly anti-black standard of beauty. The expression of identity through hairstyles have been a long-standing feature of Black

culture. Afros, hair wraps and braids have been used by Black women as a personal expression of their beauty and who they are. These hairstyles have been continually suppressed in the fashion industry by selling products that are intended to 'fix' the 'issue' of big curly hair.

(Williams, n.d.) Companies like L'Oreal and Maybelline have repeatedly ran ads featuring black models disappointed over their big, curly hair. To amend this issue, these companies offer gels, creams, straighteners, and other products that alter these traditionally black hair features in order to shape a more flattering, white look. (Williams, n.d.)

Finally, the institutionalization of anti-black hair requirements has even permeated the legal system. Today, in certain places, industries, or workplaces, traditionally Black hairstyles, such as dreadlocks, are restricted and can be a cause for termination. In 2016, a group of black women filed a lawsuit against a company that fired them over their hairstyle, claiming that their termination was discriminatory and unlawful. Despite a solid case, an 11th circuit court of appeals ruled that banning employees for wearing their hair in "locs" was justified. (Scott, 2016)

### The Effects

With such a profound permeation of anti-black racist sentiment throughout every facet of the industry, the ways in which today's fashion icons, institutions, products, and trends negatively impact the psyche and social position of black people around the world can be clearly identified. Fashion is one of the most influential aspects of today's society, thus the overt and subliminal messages it exudes weighs heavily on the minds of all people.

First, the lack of black representation in the design process of the fashion industry has several ramifications. By not including black artists and designers in the making of the most cutting-edge trends, fashion companies run the risk of being ignorant of offensive abuses or theft

of traditionally black and African culture. The designing of 'tribal' patterns by white designers of companies run by white men, shown off by white models, and sold to a mixed demographic constitute clear practices of cultural appropriation that is abhorrent to many black people who are actually emersed in the culture these companies are stealing from. Had a black designer been involved in the making of these products, the opinions and voices of the community could be championed and represented by them, and companies could avoid abuses such as these. If a company does decide to borrow patterns, designs, or other aspects of black and African culture, the inclusion of black designers in this process would lead to a more accurate and respectful depiction of the culture. Even today, most of the fashion industry is run by white men with a eurocentric focus and concept of fashion. The inclusion of diverse perspectives and opinions in the creative process of the latest trends in fashion would create a more inclusive, representative, expressive, and respectful fashion environment that would in-turn lead to further inclusivity and creativity. The fashion industry already takes a great deal of inspiration from traditionally black and African culture, it ought to reflect this influence in their faculty and staff.

The inclusion and expansion of black models in fashion runways and advertisements is important for giving young black men and women role models in the industry and expanding the concept of inclusivity that would have positive effects on the psyche of young people. The fashion has a tendency to pigeonhole black models into certain niches such as 'exotic' and 'urban' which has left them underrepresented and underpaid in comparison to their white counterparts. Aspiring black models are frequently turned away from modeling positions after hearing explanations like 'we already have a black girl' which further damages the position of the black community and leads to disillusionment and ostracization from the industry. (The

Spinoff, 2018) The specific categorization of black models also exudes the idea that black people can only be beautiful so long as they fit into these prescribed categories, having a negative impact on the psyche of the consumer base.

Additionally, the whitewashing of black models in the fashion industry through cosmetics, hair-products, and plastic surgery can breed thoughts of self-loathing in the minds of young black women in particular. Western culture typically subjects women to stringent beauty standards, as beauty is synonymous with a woman's individual value. When young black women are taught that Pale skin, long, blond hair, tall and thin feminine body, and graceful and delicate facial features comprise the standard of beauty, the result is a catastrophic blow to their self-image and self-esteem. The effects of this are acutely observed in places like Latin America, where phrases like "mejorar la raza," a term that literally translates to "better the race" but alludes to "whitening the race" are common within the fashion and cosmetics industry.

(HipLatina, 2019) In this region, the fashion industry perpetuates the century-old ideology that to be white is to be inherently better than other ethnicities, thus everyone should aspire to look and act as 'white' as possible. These sentiments - which are maintained and perpetuated in salons and boutiques throughout Latin America - can have damaging effects on the psyche of black people, or worse yet can lead to physical abuse through their justification of racism. As Dr. Alai Reyes-Santos points out, "These hierarchies divide our communities, create unnecessary pain when what we need is to be able to recognize our differences, acknowledge the colonial legacies we still have to heal and together fight for what is best for all, not a few." (HipLatina, 2019)

## The Change

The ways in which the fashion industry has advanced and perpetuated racism in our society has had disastrous effects on the psyche and position of the black community in North and South American societies. However, it is not too late to reverse this trend through mobilization of and support for the black community, along with calls for greater inclusivity in the design and modeling sectors of the industry.

One of the best ways to get any company to change their ways is by hurting their bottom line. Black people make up an astounding portion of some of the most influential fashion companies' consumer bases. Black hip-hop artists, musicians, and actors frequently don Gucci fabrics and Louis Vitton belts as fashion statements that give these companies innumerable publicity that translates to an immense amount of profit. Despite the racist actions of companies like Prada and Gucci, prominent figures in the black community have sometimes failed to mobilize against these companies in a way that matched the frustration of the rest of their community. If these people, along with general supporters of the movement, banded together and refused to give these companies their money and their free publicity, it could damage these companies' bottom line to an extent that they would be forced to address demands for greater inclusivity and sensitivity towards black artists and cultures. To some extent this has already occurred, such as during hip-hop rapper and producer T.I. 's campaign against Gucci in response to their racist turtleneck. The Hip-hop artist voiced his disdain for the companies insensitive actions, and outlined a three step process that could get the company to correct their ways. (Urquhart, 2019) He implored members of the black community to stop buying Gucci products for at least three months, urged black public figures and influencers not to give the company

publicity through wearing their articles, and to spread this message throughout the general community to gain support for the movement. This has shown to be effective, as Gucci quickly pulled the clothing line and issued a public apology.

Obviously, the responsibility for undoing the structures and perpetuating effects of systematic racism in the fashion industry does not solely rest on the shoulders of black people. Fashion designers, icons, and company owners of all colors must recognize the marginalizing structures in place in this industry, and work together to find solutions for correcting decades of intentional and unintentional racial subjugation and oppression. However, when it comes to ways in which the black community can help affect this change, mounting retaliatory boycotts and spreading awareness through tactics of collective mobilization. Black people are the primary consumers of many of the fashion companies that perpetuate racism through their designs, products, and practices. Thus, if the community refuses to accept this status quo, and refuses to buy their clothing, these fashion companies will suffer major financial losses. If fashion companies continue to suffer financial losses as a result of their racist actions, practices, and rhetoric, they will be forced to include black artists in the design process, models in their advertisements, and to eliminate the perpetuation of white elitism in their products.



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