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Racial Capitalism: How Capitalism Denies Black Bodies In The Fashion Industry

With the recent Black Lives Matter resurgence in summer of 2020, we have seen the scramble of major fashion brands and industries, such as Vogue, to suddenly appear diverse and welcoming to the Black community. This image-deep shift highlights the inequity between Black creatives and white ones in the fashion world. When truly discussing the ways in which Black creatives are being excluded from the fashion world, it is important to analyze the specific facets of racism that work within the fashion industry to ensure the disadvantage of Black creators. Forbes characterizes the journey of Black creators into the fashion world as “beset with obstacles, disadvantages, setbacks, disappointment and compromise as a result of the well-documented systemic racism and unconscious bias in fashion industry institutions and businesses” (Edelson 2020). One specific facet of white supremacy that works disservice Blackness in the fashion industry is racial capitalism. If the fashion industry intends to truly create initiatives to make creative spaces more inclusive, it must recognize and examine how capitalism, which began with slavery, has evolved to fit itself within our current society to continue to exploit Black bodies.

CAPITALISM & HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS

DEFINING RACIAL

Racial capitalism, a term coined by Professor Cedric J Robinson, describes the process of exploiting the racial identities of others to benefit the social and economic value of white individuals and more largely, white supremacy. Capitalism in America as we know it today was quite literally built on the basis of

slavery, an exploitative system. Slaves provided slaveholders with free, controlled, and continuous labor. The more slaves one had, the more profit one received in return. As a slaveholder, accumulating slaves would literally boast wealth. This resulted in the commodification of the Black body. Slaves were nothing more than property and deserved to be treated as subhuman in order to uphold the emerging capitalist society. American sociologist Matthew Desmond, in his analysis of the gruesome origins of American capitalism, says, “Given the choice between modernity and barbarism, prosperity and poverty, lawfulness and cruelty, democracy and totalitarianism, America chose all of the above” (Desmond 2019). Capitalism in America was created with the exploitation of Black bodies as its backbone.

The complex relationship between Black bodies and capitalism did not end with slavery. In order to uphold the free labor services that came with slavery, the 13th amendment was proposed, which created a loophole that allowed slavery to exist as a punishment for crime. White law enforcement, which derived from slave patrol, began arresting and imprisoning Black people for the most minor infractions. In addition to this, laws called “black codes” were used to restrict the freedoms of African Americans, to ensure their availability as an essentially free labor source by sweeping them into prison. This birthed the mass incarceration and the prison-industrial complex which mainly target the Black community. These policies and structures are still in place today and continue to support violence against Black bodies. With the current social movement towards anti-racism, there has been a push towards increasing diversity hires and emphasizing allyship with the Black community, yet there seems to be no attempt to address specific issues, such as racial capitalism. In an interview with CNN, *Teen Vogue* editor-in-chief Lindsay Peoples Wagner remarked, “Plain and simple, I don't think there is the intention behind it [brands’ push to seem inclusive] to make long-lasting, sustainable change”

(Alleyne 2020). The fashion industry's failure to address how capitalism within the industry works to disadvantage Black creatives is representative of the fact that the movement to be more inclusive and diverse is to appease the critics, not create real change. Authors Jeremie Greer and Solana Rice explain how racism is the root of Black economic process saying, "An economy that oppresses people of color must no longer be tolerated. We must focus on the root causes of our pain: racism and white supremacy. These root causes can be baked into the design of many economic or political systems, including socialism and communism" (Greer & Rice 2020). In no way is their assumption incorrect, however they fail to emphasize the importance of being able to recognize racial capitalism in its more covert forms. The fashion industry often flies under the radar when discussing economic systems, but in reality, the apparel industry was estimated to be worth about 1.9 trillion dollars in 2019 (Shahbandeh 2021). It is a major player in today's capitalistic society, and, like all capitalistic industries, consistently profits from the exploitation of Blackness.

HOW RACIAL CAPITALISM WORKS IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

The fashion industry's quickness to represent inclusivity by presenting an image of diversity ignores the much deeper, systematic oppression against Black people within that space. Black people being denied their space in the fashion community allows white designers to gain much wider-reaching platforms and be exposed to opportunities and funds Black creators would never reach because of their smaller platforms and lesser recognition. Delving deeper, we have to examine how these platforms were obtained. Reaching customers, promoting, and producing a product requires capital. In return, capital is received and accumulated through the purchase of the product. Black creators are denied capital to start their brands, and subsequently, because they are unable to grow a large platform, are denied capital. In 2016, the Center for Global Policy Solutions found that due to

discriminatory financing practices and an inclination to more readily aid companies primarily operated by white males, America is losing out on over 1.1 million minority-owned businesses (Beasley 2020). Racial capitalism works to ensure that Black people are unable to become real players in our current capitalistic society. In a study conducted on Black designers by Sian Viktoreya Lewis Brown, she found that “When the designers were asked about various hurdles or challenges when they started their businesses 82% of the entrepreneurs who took the survey said that lack of funds for their business was something that was experienced often” (Brown 25). It is important that not only spaces such as the fashion industry acknowledge how racial capitalism works to disenfranchise Black designers, but also educate Black designers on what racial capitalism is and how it affects them. Principal Consultant at Intercultural Leadership Executive, David Whitfield, expresses concern over education on racial capitalism, saying, “Racial capitalism often inflates the dominance and importance of whites and often fosters debilitating blind spots that surface for many who don’t recognize the racial dimensions of their own enterprises”. Historically, lack of education has been a prominent tactic used by the white community to oppress the Black community. By giving such a ubiquitous phenomenon a name, Black creators can identify and call out racial capitalism when it occurs.

With the denial of Black bodies in the fashion industry, it reinforces the societal notion of the dominance of the white race and the continual exploitation of Black bodies. This exploitation is most prominently seen in the constant stealing of the ideas of Black creators. This trend of white designers pirating the original ideas of Black designers has allowed for anti-black racism to become a part of the fashion industry. The cultural appropriation of Black trends has become some brands’ favorite marketing ploys. Scarlett Newman, in her analysis of the lack of diversity in the fashion world, remarked, “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” (Newman 2017). Just a few months ago, Comme des Garçons dressed white models in cornrow wigs. Marc Jacobs’ season 17 featured white models walking with wool dreadlocks and Valentino’s ‘African-inspired’ 2016 show featured barely any black models. Styles stigmatized as “ghetto” or “unsophisticated” suddenly become trendy and fun for white people to wear. Cultural appropriation is yet another result of racial capitalism and upholding current racial power structures. Political philosopher, Erich Hatala Matthes, when explaining how cultural appropriation is yet another example of exploitation of the Black community, says, “... Various explanations of the different kinds of objections typically lodged against acts of cultural appropriation are rooted in background conditions of oppression” (Matthes 4). Appropriating Black culture while simultaneously refusing Black designers and models access to the fashion world is the epitome of exploitation of Black culture for the benefit of white people.

DESIGNERS WHO EXPERIENCED RACIAL CAPITALISM

In 1952, Black designer Anne Lowe was commissioned to design then Jackie F. Onassis’ (Kennedy) wedding gown and bridesmaids’ dresses. The gown was photographed and published in newspapers all over the world. The effects of the gown on the fashion world were international. Wealthy socialites all over just *had* to have a dress similar to Jackie’s. When asked about the gown by reporters she replied, “I wanted to go to France, but a colored dressmaker did it” (Brockwell 2019). A colored dressmaker. Ann Lowe was devastated. Months of work, her entire career, all to be reduced down to “colored dressmaker. Despite her talent, Ann was constantly taken advantage of by her clients, being paid a fraction of the price by her white

clients for her designs. By the 60s, she was in thousands of dollars in debt and in trouble with the IRS. For decades she had essentially been written out of a history she helped create. In the 1980s and 90s, when Dapper Dan began creating his infamous designer logo pieces for rappers and Black celebrities, the white-owned brands took out lawsuits against him, claiming it violated brand copyrights. After the raid of his store in 1992, he was forced to close down. The brands then went on to replicate his designs, giving him no credit. It became apparent that the brands' main concern was the fact that a Black man was gaining recognition for dressing Black celebrities in their logos. In her explanation of the relationship between the fashion industry and racial capitalism, says, Newman says, "This system [capitalism] drives underground the underlying social order in the fashion industry – a social order that works to the advantage of Whites while disadvantaging everyone else deemed Other" (Newman 2017). In 2017 Gucci dressed a model with a Dapper Dan-inspired piece, once again paying no homage to Dan's original design. This incident is not an isolated one. Large white-owned fashion brands consistently exploit Black ideas and innovation because they have the financial ability to do so.

More recently, following the boom of fast fashion brands like PrettyLittleThing and FashionNova, stealing designs from lesser known, Black designers has become a common tactic for brands use. Once again, the evolution the fashion industry is accompanied by the evolution of racial capitalism. In 2019, lesser-known designer, Destiny Bleu explained that her brand had gone down nearly one-hundred thousand dollars because of FashionNova stealing her designs and selling them at a cheaper price (Battle 2019). As I mentioned earlier, reaching customers, promoting, and producing a product requires capital. In return, capital is received and accumulated through the purchase of the product. With the lack of resources and labor, Black designers often have no choice but to take economic losses.

CONCLUSION

Racial capitalism furthers the exclusion of Black bodies by perpetuating the idea that Black bodies do not belong in fashion industry in any capacity. Newman muses, “It seems impossible for black people, black women, particularly, to penetrate these [fashion-centered] spaces...It [exclusion] 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?” (Newman 11). The lack of diversity resulting from racial capitalism has made the fashion industry a space almost uninhabitable for Black bodies. *Business of Fashion* writer Chantel Fernandez remarks, “Whether or not participants agreed that fashion is best by systemic racism or inherited ignorance, most agreed that the best way for non-white creatives to move forward is to continue to focus on building their own independent business” (Fernandez 2018). What both Fernandez and the interviewed designers failed to note was the prevalence of racial capitalism in the fashion industry. Yes, we can tell Black designers to build their business outside of the space their being denied, but the struggle to obtain capital will still persist. When working to make the fashion industry a more accessible space for Black bodies, the conversation must include racial capitalism. Writer Minh-Ha T Pham asserts that rather than diversifying the executives, we must confront the deeper issues within the fashion industry, saying, “To counter fashion racism, we will need to confront fashion classism and, relatedly, neoliberal definitions of success—such as access to elite institutions and positions—as the best path to social progress.” (Pham 2019). We cannot rely on a few diversity hires to even the playing field between Black creators and white ones. Instead, racial capitalism must be directly challenged to create any real and lasting change.

While acknowledging the lack of diversity in the fashion industry is a great start to promoting change, it is imperative that we work to dismantle

the systematic structures that work to keep Black creators out. That starts with education. Pham says, “The fundamental failure of bureaucratic diversity, then, is that it fails to link racism to the foundational structures of global fashion—the ones that shape the hiring practices and labor conditions of rank-and-file workers in the production sector” (Pham 2019). Spaces like the fashion industry often fly under the radar when it comes to calling out institutionalized racism because critics tend to focus on other forms of injustice within the industry, such as labor exploitation, or the misrepresentation of the ideal female body. But, in order to transform the fashion industry into a space that welcomes and supports Black creatives, we as a society must put forth the effort into analyzing the way in which capitalism works to deny Black creators true access.

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