AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

FASHIONING IDENTITY: UNRAVELING THE LAYERS OF BLACK MODEL REPRESENTATION ON THE COVERS OF VOGUE U.S.

by
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ABSTRACT
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This thesis critically examines the history of Black female representation on the cover of Vogue U.S.. It explores how cultural change, political movements, and economic imperatives influence how Vogue assembles race through visibility. The thesis starts by examining Beverly Johnson's cover in 1974, and how this moment was not only a fashion milestone, but also came in the context of post-Civil Rights U.S., as well as Vogue's shifting editorial approaches to race. This thesis continues by investigating how the magazine editorialized Black celebrities during Anna Wintour's reign at Vogue, in that Black celebrities were selectively included and tokenized to emphasize Vogue's ongoing cultural relevancy in a time where celebrity culture and social media were on the rise. The last chapter examines how Black audiences begin to hold Vogue accountable in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, with accounts from Black industry insiders, influencers, and journalists vehemently critiquing Vogue and the industry's approach to its own racism, as well as viral fashion digital activism, such as the #VogueChallenge. Throughout the analysis of these three chapters, I conclude that Black representation in Vogue U.S. has been continuously constructed with capitalist motivations by institutional powers, not true investment in diversity. Representation needs to be done through marginalized communities themselves by creating their own self-authored media and visual narratives. The study, ultimately, contributes to larger conversations around power in media, racial representation, and the politics of visibility, and can serve as a perspective on how cultural institutions may transform into, or continue to resist calls for representation equity.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem Statement

The fashion industry has historically always had issues in regards to its relationship with race. It has functioned in a framework of racial and aesthetic exclusion, with Vogue U.S. being one of the sites that produces and reinforces dominant beauty ideologies. Despite its power and extensive cultural influence, Vogue has continuously sought to exclude Black women. When Black women are featured on the cover of Vogue, it is usually through a lens that is controlled and driven by commercial White ideologies rather than inclusivity. The marginalization of Black women and their representation in Vogue then becomes attached to larger structures of racial capitalism and aesthetic labor that dictate who is visible, how they are seen, and through what conditions their visibility becomes marketable.

While scholarly interest in media representation has grown, research tracing the exact conditions of how Black women models appear and disappear on the cover of Vogue U.S. is lacking. A more detailed exploration of such shifts, set against the backdrop of social, political, and technological change, is needed to make sense of the dynamics of racialized visibility in fashion media. This thesis discusses this by examining how the representation of Black women on Vogue U.S. covers has changed across three different periods, under what conditions these representations came to be, and what these changes reveal about power, race, and cultural capital both within and beyond the fashion industry.

1.2 Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how Black models are represented on Vogue U.S. covers. Specifically, it asks:

How can we historically account for the appearance and disappearance of Black female models on the cover of Vogue U.S., specifically, what monumental events, controversies, or cultural shifts surround the emergence and disappearance of Black female models from the covers of Vogue U.S.?

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This thesis is based on Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, which defines representation as "the production of meaning through language and discourse." Representation is an active process of meaning-making that allows for the creation of identities, norms, and stereotypes rather than just reflecting reality. People's perceptions of others and themselves are greatly influenced by these media representations.

Another central concept discussed in this thesis is the ideological image control, or the capacity to produce and disseminate dominant visual narratives. As visual rhetoric scholars assert, images are embedded in social, political, and economic contexts that influence their meaning and impact (Barnard, 2014; Appel & Weber, 2021).

bell hooks' (1992) critique of race, power, and image politics in identifying beauty standards in the fashion industry as "violent exclusions" also informs this thesis. Her theory of "the oppositional gaze" is particularly helpful in unpacking how racialized bodies are excluded, commodified, or made more visible under certain terms. Nancy Leong's (2013) theory of racial capitalism and Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2012) theory of

identity branding provide valuable insight and information into the intricate intersection between race, marketability, and visibility.

This study is just one contribution in the expanding scholarship that speaks to fashion as a site of cultural politics and academic research (Craik, 1994; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2012; Crane, 2012). Despite existing research on how Black models are represented in the media (Jankowski et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2022), the sociocultural contexts in which Black female models appear or disappear on Vogue U.S. covers have not been the subject of any particular historical analysis.

1.4 Scope and Significance

The study focuses on the visibility and representation of Black women on Vogue U.S., which is influenced by historical, social, and cultural factors. International Vogue editions will not be discussed, though they will be referenced occasionally. By focusing on a single magazine, this thesis provides an focused critique of how visual power operates within American fashion media.

Examining the representation of the Black model in American Vogue helps us gain a better understanding of the role played by fashion in creating racial hierarchies and ideals of beauty. In analyzing race, gender, and visibility historically within a significant cultural institution, this research adds to discussions in media studies, fashion studies, critical race theory, and feminist theory.

1.5 Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach based on discourse analysis, visual analysis, and archival research.

1.5.1 Archival Data Collection

All Vogue U.S. covers will be gathered and arranged chronologically. The representation of Black female models on these covers will be examined for trends, highlighting changes in frequency, styling, themes, and contexts. The key focus will be to find temporal gaps and inclusion clusters.

1.5.2 Visual analysis

The covers will be analyzed visually with attention to photographic composition, body language, clothing, art direction, and textual framing. To open a window onto the production and reception of these representations, the visual analysis will be supplemented by interviews, behind-the-scenes footage, and model testimony.

1.5.3 Secondary Sources and Biographical Accounts

Autobiographies (e.g., André Leon Talley's), biographies (e.g., Anna Wintour's), and documentaries (e.g., The September Issue, The First Monday in May, In Vogue: The 90s, and In Vogue: The Editor's Eye) will be used to gain firsthand accounts of editorial decision-making and racial relations at Vogue. Comments, articles, and viral posts from Black audiences will be examined to fully understand reactions to select covers.

1.5.4 Contextual Analysis

Black model visibility will be situated in broader socio-political and economic contexts such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and internet activism. This way, visibility can be interpreted within various dimensions.

1.6 Thesis Overview

This thesis contains three chapters, each examining a turning point in fashion history, culture, and industry-specific changes that puts into context the presence of Black women on the cover of Vogue U.S. Chapter 1 examines the social, political, and institutional factors that enabled Beverly Johnson to become the first Black woman to appear on the cover of Vogue U.S. in 1974. The chapter situates Johnson's cover within Condé Nast's changing business models and the broader Civil Rights Movement. Chapter 2 discusses the 2000s, such as Anna Wintour's appointment as editor-in-chief, the rise of digital media, and the transition from models to celebrities on the cover. The chapter explains how the cover shots of Black women have changed under evolving industry agendas and growing commodification of diversity. Chapter 3 looks at the more contemporary covers of the late 2010s through to the 2020s, where social movements like Black Lives Matter and influencer culture were on the rise. It examines how Black audiences have responded to these cultural shifts and whether these representations are the result of an actual shift or strategic market adaptation

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Popular Culture

It is essential to start by defining what is meant by popular culture. Williams (1958) argues that "culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, and its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning." Williams contends that culture should not be confined to "high arts" or elite forms but is better understood as a "whole way of life", such as through the habits, practices, meanings, institutions, and arts within a society. Building on this notion of culture, Hall (1997) treats popular culture as a site of meaning-making, identity negotiation, power, and representation. For Hall (1997), culture is "concerned with the production and exchange of meanings … between the members of a society or group." Hall (1997) goes on to explain how discourse, language, and images function as systems of representation and how popular culture is thus intricately linked to identity, ideology, and power. The collection of customs, artifacts, media, icons, and meanings that permeate society and contribute to the construction of what is deemed normal, desirable, or valuable can, therefore, be referred to as popular culture. This makes it possible for it to develop into a place where social categories like sexual orientation, gender, race, and class are created, replicated, and challenged.

Popular culture is also often synonymous with mass culture, where products are manufactured and marketed to a broad audience (Podnieks, 2024). According to Podnieks (2024), popular culture often prioritizes commercial interests, leading to the commodification of cultural products. As cultural products are frequently marketed for

financial gain, the interaction between popular culture and mass media raises concerns regarding authenticity and commodification. According to Fedorak (2009), popular culture tends to result in the loss of distinctive cultural expressions, whereby dominant cultural forms displace local traditions. According to Langer (2018), mass production and commercialization have resulted in a perceived decline in cultural quality. Yet, despite this criticism regarding commercialization and the loss of cultural depth, popular culture, mirroring the complexity of the human experience as well as societal change, remains part of modern life.

Popular culture is not just restricted to TV, radio, music, and film. It empasses practices of daily life, visual culture, magazines, and larger cultural industries. This is why fashion media is important to popular culture, it originates and reflects ideals of identity and beauty. For example, Barthes (1967) mentions that beyond its materiality, garments and fashion imagery are constituted of signs. According to Hebdige (1979), style and aesthetics have the potential of allowing identity expressions and resistances against dominant cultures. These ideas can advance our understanding of ways in which popular culture uses fashion and style as one avenue for articulating cultural negotiation and agency. The combination of image, text, fashion, and advertising within magazines like Vogue positions them as powerful cultural institutions that reflect culture but mediate and construct it at the same time.

Racial dynamics in society are constantly shaped and reflected largely through and by popular culture. It also serves as a medium through which racial identities are built, contested, and represented, influencing public perceptions and social interactions of peoples (Hall, 1992). The relationship between race and popular culture is complex; cultural tools enable the articulation of contemporary racisms (Solomos & Back, 1996).

While serving as a reflection of social attitudes, popular culture is equally engaged in the construction of racial imagery that shapes everyday perception about race (Solomos & Back, 1996). Although it often aids in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of different races, popular culture can also serve as an arena of resistance and redefinition (Hall, 1992). This dichotomy suggests that popular culture is indeed a highly contested site for the reproduction of and resistance to racialized narratives, rather than a simple reflector of social attitude.

Vogue and other fashion magazines are therefore both cultural production tools and archives of popular culture. The spread across various international editions gives symbolic power for Vogue to position itself as the arbiter of taste. Thus, Vogue both creates and documents social changes, especially those related to the roles of women, consumer culture, and standards of global beauty. The format of a magazine often blends consumerist and postfeminist discourses and prompts empowerment through visual identity and consumption (McRobbie, 2009). In this framing, fashion media becomes located within the greater landscape of popular culture, where aesthetics are coupled with ideology and commerce.

Situating Vogue and representation within popular culture illuminates the ways in which it functions both as a mirror and a maker of cultural meaning, dictating which bodies, looks, and identities are "beautiful." Popular culture is not merely entertainment; it is also an ideological site of struggle for fashioning ways of conceiving identity and worth. Vogue, with its global visibility and cultural authority, is an excellent site of study for understanding how popular culture mediates social change by shifting who is visible and who is not. The fact that Black models populate the covers of Vogue at any time in history means that those covers index key cultural moments, sites where larger

cultural narratives about beauty and race are both reflected and challenged. Making sense of these representations within popular culture clarifies the broader argument that media visibility is never neutral; it is a form of cultural power.

2.2 Representation

Stuart Hall's theory of representation is defined as "the production of meaning through language and discourse (Hall, 1997). Stuart Hall's work on representation provides the conceptual framework for making sense of how meaning is constructed through media. According to Hall (1997), meaning does not directly originate from, or is always within, cultural texts like magazine covers, but is produced and circulated through 'systems of representation'. Visual images in this case do not offer objective reflections of reality, but are coded signs, placed within ideological frameworks. According to Hall (1981), media has "a structure, a set of practices which are not reducible to the individuals who staff them," to such a level that social and cultural biases become naturalized through this cultural production.

Media representation specifically pertains to how people, groups, events, or ideas are represented and understood in media based on social relations and stereotypes (Anderson & Dixon-Payne, 2022). This is part of cultural identity because representation may perpetuate dominant narratives about identities or facilitate the emergence of new ones (Wheatley, 2024). Media representation is inherently selective, involving a framing process that emphasizes some parts and omits others, to shape beliefs, hierarchies, values, and power relations within society (Entman, 1993). The ways in which cultural groups are framed often reflect existing societal power relations, with media being used as an instrument for both cultural imperialism and resistance

(Entman, 1993). Research in media representation on historically underrepresented populations like Black and transgender people indicates that it reproduces oppressive and discriminatory stereotypes and contributes to internalized stigma and social isolation (Mittal & Sharma, 2022; Weaver, 2016). A study conducted by Weaver (2016) showed that Black characters are underrepresented in television and when represented, will almost always be represented negatively.

The inclusion of Black models within fashion media, especially covers of Vogue U.S., demonstrates racial dynamics more broadly within the industry. As bell hooks (1992) states, the psychological violence of lack of control over one's image "rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identity" (p. 4). This speaks to how the lack of representation affects not just visibility but also identity formation. That being said, the representation of Black models built around tokenism or performative diversity is largely ineffective at disrupting systemic exclusions found in the industry (hooks, 1992). In fashion media, these historical exclusions continue to shape who is shown, how they are shown, and who is kept out of the spotlight. (Dyer, 1993; Church Gibson, 2012; Leong, 2013). Without challenging the broader visual economy that permits their representation, it is difficult to characterize the Black models' appearances on Vogue covers as neutral, much less progressive.

hooks (1992) builds upon Hall's work by bringing the Black female subject to the forefront of the politics of visual culture. Even when Black women do appear in mainstream representations, hooks (1992) says they do so, "to serve - to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallocentric gaze". Current research shows that mainstream representations often accommodate white audiences' perceptions of Blackness through limited, inauthentic representations (Corsbie-Massay et al., 2022).

The same is true of fashion media, in which Black models are frequently dressed, styled, and photographed either to exoticize their physical characteristics or to be made to look White (Wissinger, 2012).

hooks (1992) also discusses the possibility of agency and reclamation within representation. She describes how Black women can engage with visual culture as subjects of the gaze as opposed to objects of the gaze (hooks, 1992). When Black women engage with their bodies and sexuality in an authentic way that emphasizes desire, pleasure, and erotic recognition, it has the potential to disrupt existing dominant visual codes that have excluded or conditioned Black women to be marginalized objects of the gaze. In reclaiming their desire and identity, hooks (1992) believes, Black women may create "new and different representations" not necessarily positive ones, but transgressive representations that potentially open up radical possibilities for Black female subjectivity. This way, representation becomes a site of struggle and reinvention, where the sites of identity are "not outside but in representation" (Hall, 1997), where the display of the Black female body can serve as an act of self-recognition rather than voyeuristic consumption.

The notion of representation as both limit and potential is also found in Richard Dyer's work, and complicates how cultural images operate. Like Hall, Dyer (1993) stresses that representation is not a mirror; representation is an organized way of making sense of the world through signs and codes. Dyer (1993) claims cultural texts “have no single determinate meanings,” and different people will read images differently based on the cultural codes that they may have access to (Dyer, 1993). While this means that different readings of Vogue covers with Black models are possible, Dyer (1993) cautions against overestimating the liberatory potential of this difference. For Dyer

(1993), structures of representation remain dominated by the privileged, elite, white, male, heterosexuals, and attaining equality in visual culture remains very limited. High culture dominance, concentration of mass media production, and the disenfranchisement of other voices ensure that mainstream representation is always shaped by these powers.

For the purposes of this thesis, representation serves as a theoretical and cultural tool for understanding the ways Black models are represented, understood, and circulated through fashion media. Representation is not simply an issue of who is visible, but an issue of how meaning is produced and circulated through cultural symbols like magazine covers. Stuart Hall provides the framework for understanding the process, with bell hooks and Richard Dyer extending the analysis to discuss how race, gender, and power operate in visual culture. In the context of Vogue US, their images force us to question whether representations of Black models are merely a matter of inclusion, or whether they necessarily interrupt fashion's dominant visual and ideological codes.

Still, representation acts as a gatekeeping process by deciding who gets to be seen, how they are seen, and in what conditions. Inclusion of Black models can be symbolically significant, but what kinds of Blackness are being made visible is what's more important.

hooks (1992) argues that a truly radical representation would "not simply offer diverse representations, they imagine new transgressive possibilities for formulation of identity". Representation is a political act; an act that builds identity, decides visibility, and reconfirms or resists the status quo. It is fundamentally an act of making meaning about how Blackness, femininity, and desirability are formed and engaged with in a space historically mediated by whiteness.

2.3 Race

In critical theory and cultural studies, race has been defined by scholarly perspectives as a social construct and not a biological fact. (Obach, 1999). The term "race" emerged in the 1600s, primarily to describe the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonial rule (Braveman & Dominguez, 2021). It is a system of historical classification that has been shaped by colonial histories, cultural production, and historic violence (Obach, 1999). The idea rejects the notion that there are clear definitions of race, but that race is constructed and constantly reshaped through cultural narrations and media forms. Frantz Fanon (1986) suggests a similar line of thought with his idea of the epidermal schema. Fanon (1986) discusses how the Black body becomes indexed with meaning in a colonial/post-colonial context; skin color works as a visual marker of difference, subject to regulation, fetishization, and exclusion. Critical understandings therefore provide the necessary point of origin for examining how Blackness is not only represented but also interpreted within fashion media.

In terms of modeling and fashion, race acts as a site of hypervisibility and limitation. Wissinger (2012) states race in modeling is “both an asset and a liability,” and Black models are cast either to project an image of surface-level diversity or to showcase some exotic appeal, but rarely as the ideal form of beauty. Wissinger (2012) discusses the concept of aesthetic labor to explain the corporeal work that models undertake to satisfy industry expectations. For Black models, the aesthetic labor is heightened with the added layers of an aesthetic regime that is racialized and often valorizes Eurocentric ideals while commodifying racial difference. This tension is

shaped by what Wissinger (2012) terms the white gaze and corporate gaze; industry logics that filter which racialized bodies are visible, and under what terms.

Richard Dyer (1997) states that throughout history, white identity has acted as an unmarked norm that is rendered "invisible" by the pervasiveness of white skin in Western visual culture. Fashion photos and cinema, using white skin tones, have heavily encoded technical biases that position non-white subjects as aberrations on the visual plane (Dyer, 1997). Dark-skinned models, for example, have for ages been described as "difficult to light" or difficult to photograph; a technological myth meant to account for and legitimize their absence (Dyer, 1997). This naturalizes whiteness as the norm and constitutes non-white presence as a cultural and visual disruption.

In this light, the representation of Black female models becomes even more complicated. bell hooks (1992) discusses how Black women are visually subordinated in fashion media, shown as instantiating everything from mannequin to accessory, in which their femininity is always mediated through previously decided cultural interpretations of their Blackness as ornamental, with no visualization of what it means to be a Black woman when considering authentic self-representations, which makes invisible Black women's agency. Essentially, no matter how Black women are represented, hooks (1992) argues, they are still deliberately created to look as white as possible. The nuances of racism are often less visible in high fashion models due to what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) calls “controlling images”, which are stereotypical representations of Black womanhood that limit communications of their agency and self-identities.

To understand the various layers of oppression encountered in fashion by Black women, an intersectional framework is essential (Crenshaw, 1989). Black female

models, specifically, are endorsed by racialized beauty ideals, as they commit to a traditional feminine gender identity that aims to make them less suggestively ethereal or race-ambiguous. Their bodies are occupied reminders of contested space, for their bodies are both fetishized and policed, as they are both visible and erased. This resembles Du Bois' (1903) idea of double consciousness; being beholden to both self and an imposed image of oneself by a predominantly White culture. The idea of the oppositional gaze does suggest a way of seeing that is critical and refuses to be subjected to absorbing derogatory images; rather, the oppositional gaze "contests, resists, revises, interrogates, and invents" (hooks, 1992). The oppositional gaze is relevant in discourses around Black women in fashion media, not as passive consumers but as different spectators and producers who reclaim their image and their presence on their own terms.

In the fashion industry, race is not just a demographic marker; it is an apparent system of representation that is mediated by power, aesthetics, and technology. The use of Black models on the cover of Vogue and other fashion media is more than representation; it must be read through the lens of historical exclusions, racialized aesthetics, and whiteness as the normative frame of beauty.

2.4 Fashion

Fashion is an ideology that justifies the power of the dominant class and consolidates a system whereby appearance conforms and, in most instances, indicates social status (Hoskins, 2014). Fashion has been associated with power historically, as found in the imposition of sumptuary laws in France, where exhibition of wealth was regulated and reaffirmed social structures (Hiner, 2022). The fashion industry is a $1.2 trillion global market, with over $250 billion in yearly spending by U.S. consumers

alone (Maloney, 2015). It is a closed, select, and powerful group of producers and consumers. The Paris fashion industry, for example, showcases such power as it is a hub of economic and cultural activity where designers collaborate and compete to produce global fashion trends (Villette & Hardill, 2010). The industry operates as a cultural production system, producing and reproducing aesthetic norms, often in the exclusion of diversity.

Fashion magazines especially establish personal cultural norms, specifying desirable attributes and necessities, thus determining societal perceptions of beauty (Barnard, 2014). Vogue itself played a crucial role in determining beauty from its inception, specifically in the 1920s, as it linked modern womanhood to slenderness and youth and thus solidified what women must aspire to look like in society (Kurkdjian, 2019). As Rocamora (2001) argues, Vogue has made it possible for high fashion and mass culture to come together and thereby acquired "high symbolic capital within the fashion field" and had an influence on mainstream culture with its own laws of culture and aesthetics of beauty. The development of the magazine through the years reflects changing cultural ideals from the Victorian period to today, but it still maintains a typical aesthetic that excludes certain body types and races (Hill, 2007). Therefore, understanding Vogue opens a door to examining how elite fashion institutions create and disseminate standards of beauty and cultural norms.

American Vogue is the most popular edition of Vogue, with The Guardian, The New York Times, and other high-profile media companies calling it the fashion ‘bible’ (Clifford, 2009). Published by Condé Nast, a mass media company owned by Advance Publications, Vogue magazine has a print readership of 22.5 million unique readers each month (Condé Nast, n.d.). The U.S. print audience is 11.9 million readers, 8.5 million

additional average monthly online readership, and its assorted 23 international editions are all in a very real sense culturally representative of the fashion and beauty industries they cover, as well as symbolically representative of the entire system of cultural production. Vogue not only represents dominant beauty ideals, standards of beauty, and culture, but creates them as well.

Consumption in fashion is intricately linked with the creation and reinforcement of social identities, particularly for women seeking to assert autonomy (McRobbie, 2009). This is why fashion models act as cultural barometers of race, gender, and consumption (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2012). The fashion model functions as an embodiment of clothing, but also as a representational figure, one that conveys existing social norms pertaining to femininity, race, and class (Mears 2011). Yet the appearance of the model has been extremely uniform. Mears (2011) refers to this as the "isomorphism" of the model look, where most high-fashion models are White (or appear so) and ultra-thin. A racial capitalist system perpetuated by a Eurocentric aesthetic is still seen in many magazines and fashion runways, treating racial identity as a source of tokenism rather than meaningful inclusion (Leong 2013).

Fashion has historically been, and still is currently, racist, excluding people of color from its ideals of beauty and perpetuating derogatory stereotypes through media portrayals and cultural appropriation (Hoskins, 2014). Hoskins (2014) discusses how, due to fashion production being a highly lucrative business, it “has historically been guarded as a domain reserved for one demographic: rich, thin and white". Hoskins (2014) also provides examples of "exotic" landscapes and "tribal" imagery used with white models, and the lack of diversity on catwalks. Black models are often requested to adhere to specific beauty standards different from their white counterparts (Wissinger,

2012). The portrayal of Black bodies in high fashion frequently emphasizes a "marketable black aesthetic," which can dilute the significance of their racial identity (Summers, 2017). The role of consumers has, however, shifted, with their preferences driving trends and the demand for sustainable practices, prompting brands to rethink their strategies (Drew & Sinclair, 2015).

While Vogue has been studied in fashion scholarship (Rocamora, 2001; Mears, 2011; Entwistle & Wissinger, 2012), racial representations in fashion media and especially in Vogue have been only theoretically or statistically documented in the literature. For example, Wissinger (2012) discusses aesthetic labor and the racialized body, drawing out the structural issues for Black models; Leong (2013) and Summers (2017) address the commodification of racial identity within the neoliberal fashion economy; and while a number of studies from The Fashion Spot have quantitatively tracked model diversity, offering important but surface-level insights into inclusion patterns, these approaches, for the most part, rarely addressed the historical specificity or sociopolitical contexts under which moments of Black representations appeared on Vogue covers. Fashion Theory's 2006 issue also took up the subject of fashion and race, but did not thoroughly interrogate Vogue's editorial decisions historically nor place Black model appearances within broader cultural shifts. This thesis fills that gap with a historical and contextual discussion of Black models in Vogue U.S. cover images. The aim is not to record representations, but to uncover the cultural, political, or commercial changes that made these representations possible in particular moments, and thus reflect the processes through which racial visibility in elite fashion media is formed.

CHAPTER 3

THE FIRST COVER

Beverly Johnson had been quick in the early 1970s to sign with the formidable model Eileen Ford agency, and just as swift, at 19, to inform her, “I want to be on the cover of American Vogue.” When Ford asked her snappily, “Who do you think you are? Cleopatra?” Johnson was as quick with a comeback, “That’s exactly who I think I am.” A few years later, Beverly Johnson did, in fact, become the first Black model on the cover of the magazine. The cover came about three years into Grace Mirabella’s successful tenure as editor-in-chief of Vogue. The issue was seen as a step towards greater representation and acknowledgment of the contributions and presence of Black individuals in American society and culture. The Beverly Johnson cover marked a shift in cultural representation in mainstream media. “Being on the cover meant that you won the Oscar. It meant that you had a gold medal, and that's where I wanted to go. I wanted to be at the top of that profession, and not just the top Black model. I wanted to be the top model, period,” Johnson remarked years later.

Johnson was as surprised as everyone that she made the cover: "In those days, you never knew if you were on the cover until you were on the cover.” After finding out that same morning that she had made the cover, Johnson first called her mother and then ran to a nearby newsstand to see the cover for herself. “I remember going to the newsstand and going, ‘Oh my god, I forgot my money.’” Johnson tried to explain to the newsstand owner that she had left her purse at home: “But this is me!” she told the attendant, but he wasn’t having it, replying, “If that was you, you’d have the money.”

This August 1974 issue was a milestone for the model and the magazine: Johnson was the first Black woman to ever appear on the cover of the American edition of Vogue. She was photographed by Francesco Scavullo, a regular Vogue contributor. The format of Johnson's cover followed the head-and-shoulders st yle the magazine stuck to throughout the 70s and 80s. The cover features a close-up portrait of Beverly Johnson, framed in a tight headshot that centers her face, allowing her striking features to dominate the frame. Her hair was pulled back, and she was wearing an Angora cardigan with Bulgari diamond loop earrings. The light was soft but direct, bringing out the warmth and closeness of her skin and high cheekbones. The viewer is drawn in by Johnson's composed and assured face as she stares directly into the camera. In some ways, its predictable layout is what makes it so remarkable. "Scavullo didn't shy away from Johnson's Blackness or depict her as 'other,'" wrote Vogue writer Janelle Okwodu in a 2016 article. "Instead, [the photo] presented a vision of elegant beauty that was relatable and real and totally of her era."

The cover read: "Our American Look issue," printed in bold, standing out against the minimalist background. "Our" suggested an effort to incorporate Black beauty into the mainstream understanding of what the American aesthetic is, and expand traditionally narrow definitions of beauty beyond race to imply that Johnson's beauty was a quintessential reflection of the American identity. "Our American Look" was a deliberate way of marking the shifting fashion narrative in America. It acknowledged and celebrated the multifaceted cultural reality of America. This textual and visual combination was designed to create a narrative of empowerment, beauty, and cultural transformation. But

Figure 1. Beverly Johnson Vogue U.S. Cover, 1974

what prompted Beverly Johnson to grace the cover, and under what context did the cover come to be? Why was Vogue motivated to make this "bold" move? What factors

influenced Vogue's decision to feature Beverly Johnson on the cover? And how did the Vogue cover reflect the evolving nature of fashion and culture in the US?

I argue that Beverly Johnson, being the first Black model to be on the cover of American Vogue in August 1974, marked a significant moment in fashion history as well as reflected a specific moment in the racial and cultural landscape of the United States. There were several factors that made this milestone possible: shift in public opinion following the Civil Rights Movement, Vogue's editorial direction changed under Grace Mirabella's leadership, the fashion industry made groundbreaking changes that made Black people more visible, and the magazine had its own financial incentives for wanting to reach a larger audience. The combination of each of these events created a unique window for Johnson to make his groundbreaking cover. First, Beverly Johnson's cover was a sign of a bigger change in society in the 1970s toward more racial diversity and inclusion. In the decade prior, the Civil Rights Movement had made a lot of progress, and more and more people were voicing the need for racial equality. Mainstream media was also becoming more open to presenting Black beauty, and Vogue took advantage of this by putting Johnson on the cover. Second, Vogue's leadership changes were instrumental. In 1971, Grace Mirabella succeeded Diana Vreeland as Vogue's editor-in-chief. The magazine began to become more inclusive and contemporary under her leadership. Growing demands for diversity and inclusion aligned with Mirabella's vision, resulting in a more progressive editorial stance and Johnson's ground-breaking cover. It was also strategically beneficial from a financial standpoint to have a Black model on the cover of Vogue. As the magazine sought to boost its readership and advertising revenue, it became increasingly important to appeal to a broader demographic of readers. As advertisers recognized the growing purchasing

power of Black consumers, Johnson's inclusion was a move that matched both social progress and financial gain. Beverly Johnson's cover on US Vogue was not an isolated incident but rather a confluence of changing social attitudes, progressive leadership within the magazine, industry-wide shifts, and financial considerations. It was a major advancement in how Black beauty was portrayed in fashion media, reflecting and influencing larger social shifts in the US.

In this chapter, I will first discuss the US context regarding race relations in the early 1970s, highlighting the social and legislative progress made during the Civil Rights Movement and its impact on societal attitudes toward race. I will then discuss changes both internally with Vogue's leadership, including Grace Mirabella's vision and commitment to modernization and diversity, and changes externally with significant events in the fashion industry, specifically the Battle of Versailles, which provided opportunities for Black talent and changed the fashion sphere. Finally, I will explore the financial incentives for Vogue, emphasizing how the inclusion of a Black model aligned with the magazine's goals of expanding its audience and attracting diverse advertising revenue.

3.1 Stitching Equality: Race Relations in 1960s and 70s America

In January 1962, outside of Purple Manor, a nightclub in Harlem, New York City, a special fashion show took place. This fashion show, which garnered a largely Black audience, triggered a movement that would change the way Black people represented and saw themselves. The Naturally ’62 fashion show was produced by the African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS), which consisted of Black activists and artists. The fashion show had Black women modeling their natural hair unabashedly,

and wearing clothing that had African designs, such as the Dashiki (Fowler, 2021). These women, who purposefully defied Westernized beauty standards, were called the Grandassa Models (the word Grandassa is derived from the term "Grandassaland," used by Black nationalist Carlos Cooks as a term to refer to Africa). They centered their beauty around what they felt was their natural Blackness (Fowler, 2021).

The 1960s represented a dramatic period of political change in the United States as a result of the growing civil rights movement in America. The civil rights movement aimed to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans, and the 1960s were marked by landmark accomplishments of the movement, such as the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965). The Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. It ended segregation in public places and outlawed employment discrimination based on the above characteristics, laying the groundwork for further legislative progress (Klarman, 2004). The Voting Rights Act aimed to overcome legal barriers at the state and local levels that prevented Black Americans from exercising their right to vote (Garrow, 1978). The civil rights movement and all that was accomplished in the 1960s set the stage for ongoing efforts toward racial equality and justice in America and transformed the social landscape of America forever.

These legislative victories began the work of dismantling institutionalized racism and afforded greater access to opportunity in education, employment, and media for Black people (Leffler, 2014). This time marked a renaissance for Black culture, which is now referred to as the Black Arts Movement, the cultural wing of the Black Power Movement. The Black Power Movement ascribed importance to concepts such as ethnic pride, economic empowerment, and the establishment of political and cultural

institutions, which caused a radical shift in societal attitudes and artistic expression (Joseph, 2007). The Natural ’62 show occurred during a period of creativive explosion in Black communities (Smethurst, 2005). Increased media representation of Black artists, musicians, and actors began to challenge and change the mainstream perception of beauty and talent (Gray, 2004; hooks, 1992). These movements essentially sculpted a cultural space intended for a more diverse America.

In doing the show, the Grandassa models were expressing their hope for Black social and cultural independence from White America. The Naturally ‘62 show was ultimately more than just about women posing and walking; it kick-started the Black Is Beautiful movement that spanned the ‘60s and ‘70s. The movement was referred to as “a broad embrace of Black culture and identity. It called for an appreciation of the Black past as a worthy legacy, and it inspired cultural pride in contemporary Black achievements.” (Smithsonian, 2020). The movement affirmed natural hairstyles like the “Afro” and the variety of skin tones and hair textures found in the African American community. The movement and the Grandassa Models themselves, in many ways, presented Black beauty to be seen and appreciated, opening the door for future Black models to be visible in magazines and, by extension, Black women to be visible in media and society.

The significance of this Naturally '62 show in the context of Beverly Johnson's cover was important because it illustrates the fundamental shifts in representations of culture and the increased visibility and praise for Black beauty, where all these shifts were necessary for her historic cover on US Vogue. While one might choose to dismiss art and, by extension, fashion, beauty, and modeling as “real world” concerns, art is omnipresent in social relations, contemporary capitalism, and other facets and, as such,

a valid point of discussion (Nyong'o, 2014). The show and the Black Is Beautiful movement challenged and transformed ideas of Western beauty standards, mainly shown in notions toward natural Black features and cultural practices. This cultural change not only empowered Black individuals but also influenced mainstream media and fashion industries to embrace diversity. By showcasing Black models like the Grandassa Models, the movement slowly opened doors for future generations, making it socially and culturally normal for a major publication like Vogue to feature a Black model on its cover.

Similar to the Black Power Movement affecting the fashion media industry, in the 1960s, there was an increase in the economic empowerment of African Americans (Ogbar, 2019). This movement prompted a sense of pride and identity among African Americans, influencing various cultural domains, where there was a growing demand for representation and diversity. With the growth of the Black middle class and greater access to education and employment opportunities, African Americans began to have more influence as consumers and cultural trendsetters (Ogbar, 2019). This also meant that Black owned businesses and markets were also on the rise, especially in the beauty, hair, and fashion sectors (Ogbar, 2019). These businesses not only provided products specifically for the African American consumer but also helped to promote Black models and designers, adding to a more inclusive fashion landscape (Burns et al., 2023). Therefore, the growing purchasing power of the Black audience affected and, in many ways, required companies to increase Black representation if they were to succeed.

The connection between these historical developments was clear in the fashion industry's evolving landscape. While the Black Power Movement focused on economic empowerment and racial pride, it laid the groundwork for Black models in the media to

gain more attention and representation. The media's change towards targeting certain demographics, compelled by the need to cater to advertisers' financial needs, reinforced the importance of including African American consumers in marketing strategies. It became a dual influence that opened the door to a more inclusive fashion industry and encouraged businesses to pay attention to the economic power of Black consumers while also creating a space for inclusion within the future fashion world.

The civil rights movement prompted extensive sociopolitical change and social expectations for racial equality. These movements together challenged the system, pushing for more inclusive representations in different societal domains like media and fashion. The civil rights movement opened the door for greater visibility and opportunities for African Americans in multiple industries. Fashion, both as a commercial and cultural industry, started to reflect these societal changes. The increased demand for racial equality and representation helped the inclusion of African American models in mainstream fashion runway shows and publications (Craig, 2002; Peiss, 1998). This era of heightened social consciousness and activism created an environment conducive to the emergence of African Americans in previously segregated spaces.

3.2 Vogue's Visionary: Grace Mirabella's Editorial Transformation

During this period, Vogue U.S. began to experience significant changes. By shifting from the elite perspective of earlier decades to a more different portrayal of beauty and style, the content started to reflect the cultural and social transformation of the 1960s. (Lauridsen, 2014; Alexandersson & Matlak, 2017). One of the major changes that occurred in fashion was in 1963 when Diana Vreeland was named editor-in-chief. She pulled the magazine in theatrical new directions that would define a new world of

fashion and creativity. Vreeland, who had previously served as fashion editor at Harper's Bazaar, was known for her imaginative and over-the-top approach to fashion editorials. This would go on to inform Vogue's lavish, highly stylized editorial shoots that placed the reader in bizzare locations mixed. Influenced by the decade's experimental fashion and new youth culture, the magazine adopted a fresh and contemporary look. Photographers like Irving Penn and Richard Avedon would also take a more artistic avant-garde approach to fashion photography, which would later develop into a definitive stylistic language for Vogue's photography. The editorial content changed to cover more topics, including art, culture, and social issues, reflecting the shifts in society.

Under Vreeland, Vogue was less about practical fashion and more about escapism (Silverman, 1986). Beyond Vogue, Vreeland was a cultural tastemaker who introduced readers to new trends and ideas (Stuart, 2013; Silverman, 1986). However, by the end of the 1960s, the social and cultural landscape was changing quickly. The counterculture, second wave feminism, and focus on practicality and comfort started to clash with Vreeland's extravagant and impractical vision. The magazine's change in aesthetics, driven by the influence of social movements and Vreeland’s vision, marked a significant departure from the traditional glamour of the 1950s, showcasing a more diverse fashion landscape.

With Vreeland’s unique vision, the magazine's circulation slowly began to suffer as its pages seemed more and more out of touch with the everyday lives of its readers. Vreeland’s once ground-breaking vision began to alienate vast numbers of readers who couldn’t (or wouldn’t) wear her purple see-through blouses and sequin pants to their jobs. Newsstand sales of the magazine plummeted; in the first three months of 1971,

sales of advertising pages at Vogue had fallen a full 40% (Paul, 2022). Even though her vision was once revolutionary, the shifting tastes of the audience rendered it less relevant over time. Vreeland's disco go-go boots were walking the magazine straight into oblivion.

In 1971, for its own financial stability and success, Condé Nast appointed Grace Mirabella as the new editor-in-chief of Vogue. This appointment marked a strategic decision by Vogue to shift its editorial direction to a more down-to-earth editorial aesthetic. Grace Mirabella, who had been at Vogue for over twenty years, including her time as Vreeland's assistant, had experience with the magazine and Vogue's audience. Her approach was very different from Vreeland's, focusing on practicality and the needs of the modern woman. Andy Warhol cheekily commented that Mirabella had been given the job because "Vogue wanted to go middle-class" (Kelly, 2018). The transition from Diana Vreeland to Grace Mirabella marked a major transition in Vogue's editorial direction and representation of the cultural zeitgeist. Diana Vreeland, who had been known for her extravagant and avant-garde approach, led Vogue from 1963 to 1971, while Grace Mirabella, who succeeded her, brought a more practical and accessible vision to the magazine.

It was in Mirabella's tenure that the Beverly Johnson cover came about. Her Vogue was characterized by a more subdued, practical aesthetic. Mirabella once said, "I wanted to give Vogue back to real women. And even though I'd repeatedly been told that my idea of reality as seen in Vogue bore no resemblance to the real thing, I still wanted to create a new image of reality, a heightened reality, as I always called it, that would show women working, playing, acting, and dancing" (Kelly, 2018). Mirabella wanted fashion that was wearable and practical first. This shift was evident in the

magazine's fashion spreads, which featured simpler, more accessible outfits, and in its editorial content, which included advice on health, fitness, and practical living.

Despite Vreeland's supporters looking down at Mirabella as boring, "real" women came to see her as a godsend. As did the company executives who basked in the glory of Mirabella's success in raising Vogue circulation from 400,000 in 1971 to 1,245,000 in 1987, when she left the magazine after 17 years (Mirabella & Warner, 1995). "Under Grace, Vogue had an enormous renaissance," Liberman, a Condé Nast editor said. "She addressed the needs, the looks, of the real, modern American woman" (Collins, 2011). Mirabella, it seemed, knew how to sell to everyday women.

The transition from Vreeland to Mirabella had serious implications for Vogue and the fashion industry. Mirabella's editorial focus was on the magazine's readers and the changes in cultural and social norms of the 1970s. Mirabella's approach to practical fashion and the "everyday woman" was a clear departure from Vreeland's over-the-top fashion and established room for broader representations. It was in this more grounded editorial change that Beverly Johnson's historic cover came to be, highlighting Mirabella's commitment to showing various representations of modern womanhood. Mirabella's time at Vogue overlapped with change within the fashion industry, such as the shift from ready-to-wear collections to haute couture. Her inclusion of accessible fashion was in alignment with this shift, helping Vogue to remain relevant in the fashion world. Her leadership contributed to the democratization of fashion; by featuring affordable clothing, she made high fashion more achievable for the average reader. In addition to increasing Vogue's appeal, this strategy pushed brands and designers to acknowledge and serve the rising purchasing power of American Black consumers.

3.3 Fashion's Revolution: The Battle of Versailles

In 1973, only a few months before Johnson's cover, the Palace of Versailles in Paris had fallen victim to termites, worms, and leaks and desperately needed funds for repair. Originally, a fashion event by New York-based fashion publicist Eleanor Lambert was organized as a fundraiser to restore the palace. The fashion event became an idea of bringing five American designers together to present their upcoming collections. The American contingent, consisting of designers Stephen Burrows, Oscar de la Renta, Bill Blass, Anne Klein, and Halston, brought a dynamic and innovative approach to fashion. Unlike their French counterparts, who adhered to the traditional, craftsmanship-heavy haute couture, the Americans showcased ready-to-wear collections that emphasized creativity and practicality. They were a group of friends, rivals, and total strangers who had been brought together to represent the American fashion industry.

The designers came with three dozen professional runway models to present their ready-to-wear to an international audience. Ten of those models were black - an unusually high proportion that reflected the new 1970s politics, fashion economics, and social tensions (Givhan, 2016). The American designers were ostensibly guests of five of their French counterparts: Hubert de Givenchy, Yves Saint Laurent, Emanuel Ungaro, Pierre Cardin, and Marc Bohan of Christian Dior. Unlike the Americans, these Frenchmen were rooted in the painstaking craftsmanship of haute couture, a tradition that had dominated French fashion since the nineteenth century. Where the Americans came to Versailles trying to prove something, to show the world their scrappy, boundary-breaking creativity, the French arrived confidently prepared to impress by stature and extravagance.

The event, labeled The Battle of Versailles, was a pivotal moment in fashion history as the Americans indisputably won using Black models, launching their talent and fashion to the level of the French (Givhan, 2015). The Battle of Versailles became fundamental in propelling the American fashion industry forward (Rikki, 2018). While designers in France had self-anointed themselves as the authority of fashion, on November 28, 1973, American designers claimed their place in the international fashion arena. Designers, journalists, writers, celebrities, and photographers have all credited much of the event's success to the performances of the ten Black models featured: Billie Blair, Alva Chinn, Pat Cleveland, Bethann Hardison, Jennifer Brice, Norma Jean Darden, Charlene Dash, Barbara Jackson, China Machado, Ramona Saunders, and Amina Warsuma (Givhan, 2015). Each model gave memorable performances that garnered headlines in the media. Collectively, they functioned as ten Black models engaged in performances that framed their Black female bodies within the context of their memorable runway performances (Givhan, 2015; Rikki, 2018).

These Black women brought a runway flair unlike anything seen before. They added dynamic movement to both the clothing and the runway itself, which had previously been characterized by a more rigid, subdued presentation. As model Pat Cleveland (2021) remembers, "some of the girls had never been off Seventh Avenue they, never been to Paris and it was like all the girls that you would never see in your life were the saviors of American fashion because the rhythm in their souls, the Black girls...but it was after this moment of Versailles." Many of the selections of these models were based on their beauty and professionalism, but also the energy and spirit that they could bring to the runway, which American designers wanted to use to differentiate themselves from their more traditional French counterparts.They were

chosen on purpose because they represented a bold, contemporary, and socially relevant American aesthetic and performance style in the 1970s. The models brought in an expressive, confident way of moving that changed the way fashion was enacted on the runway, making fashion a personal performance. In their live and embodied presence, the Black models helped to expand the visibility of the Black female body as beautiful and desirable (Rikki 2018). Their commercial success also demonstrated their market value, both to the organizers and to the larger fashion industry, reflecting their overall profitability. This marked a critical moment that proved Black models could interest and engage global audiences, boost brand prestige, and fundamentally impact the wider industry approach to representation.

After Versailles, European designers were "more enthusiastic about diversity and encouraging models to show more of their individuality on the runway" (Feitelberg, 2022). Most American designers did not use Black models for fear of losing clients, but Europe had always embraced Black models and put them to work (Gross, 1995). For example, in England, Donyale Luna, was the first African-American model on the cover of British Vogue in 1966, years before the event and Johnson’s cover. Part Irish, part French, part Mexican, and part African-American, Luna was the first dark-skinned model on the cover of British Vogue. Luna was a sensation in London and Paris and advanced the representation within the magazine industry (Gross, 1995). The event ultimately opened the door for the Black model in Europe giving her access to more job opportunities and visibility in the mainstream as well as American runways, a place they previously rarely entered.

The Black model's contributions to the Battle of Versailles fashion show not only solidified a victory for American designers but also broadened the conception of

Black feminine beauty within the fashion industry (Givhan, 2015). Their visibility, success and exposure at such a major event reinforced the commercial viability of Black models and their ability to increase sales, status, and overall value in the fashion marketplace.. Even though this shift allowed for the inclusion and celebration of Black models and their performances linked to Black identity, it did not necessarily translate into greater prolonged social justice. It did, however, contribute to producing the most prolific and active era for Black women in modeling and fashion, starting with the first time Vogue US placed a Black woman on its cover, which featured Beverly Johnson, only a few months later.

3.4 Fashioning Profits: The Financial Gains of Embracing Diversity

The fashion industry at large, especially the fashion magazine industry, following these events, began to reflect these societal changes. Non-White faces started to appear in fashion magazines and advertisements, signaling a slight shift toward inclusivity. In needing to distinguish itself from the long established Eileen Ford modeling agency, the new Wilhelmina agency began to hire models of color (Joiner, 2006). As the first African American model hired by Wilhelmina, Naomi Sims shattered barriers and opened doors for models of color (Gross, 1995). The success of Sims, particularly after she appeared on the cover of The New York Times Magazine biannual Fashions of the Times in 1967, illustrated the changing landscape of the fashion industry and society's slow shift in definitions of beauty. Sims, somehow, broke through the industry's color lines.

In 1968, only months after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and during a period of intense racial tension, Glamour magazine, a popular fashion

magazine at the time, sought to make a statement by placing Katiti Kironde on its cover. She was the first non-White model on the cover of a women's magazine. The issue that featured Kironde on the cover was a great success nationally and remains Glamour's best-selling issue (Pous, 2013). Ford increased its African-American models by 25%, but within three months had sized down to only six black models (Gross, 1995). Sims, who later left Wilhelmina for Ford and was earning $1,000 a week, an exorbitant amount back then, especially for a Non-White model, made the cover of Ladies' Home Journal, the first time a Non-White model had appeared in the national magazine (Gross, 1995). Black women were beginning to be seen on the covers of national magazines, and they were selling out.

The dynamics of the industry really affected the structure and presentation of media and advertising. Early magazines published articles not just for the entertainment of the readers, but to entertain and satisfy an advertiser (Johnson, 2008). Content was also constructed in ways that reflected the interests of advertisers. Vreeland's editorial style was creative and unconventional, but did not appeal to advertisers. Beginning in the 1970s magazines began to increasingly brand themselves to marketable, identifiable targeted audiences - sometimes with magazines created exclusively for targeting specific market segments as vehicles for advertisers (Johnson, 2008). Magazines began a distinct trend toward establishing clearer demographic identities. This marked the first significant level of demographic fairs' recognition and cultural transition of consumers with brands; their specific market segment took notice of them as a consumer force, particularly in regards to African Americans.

The fragmentation of the market and the increasing competition made marketing to minorities, including African Americans, more critical (Cruz, 2015). Advertisers

began to seek out smaller markets with significant purchasing power. This was particularly evident in advertising to ethnic groups, which reflected not just a change in status but their (cash) value to advertisers (Clark, 1989). The lucrative potential of minority markets became increasingly recognized: "Businesses are discovering that previously ignored ethnic groups are growing in market power" (Holland, 1999).Meeting the perceived needs of these consumers began to equal business success. Some industries, such as beauty and cosmetics, began to directly target African-American women (Frith, 1997)

Vogue appeared to seize this chance to appeal to the Black community that was emerging from these shifts that redefined consumer markets and media strategies. The rise of the Black Power Movement emphasized the importance of racial pride and economic empowerment, disrupting the cultural landscape and amplifying calls for representation and diversity. At the same time, the magazine industry responded by identifying more niche specific audiences according to advertising demand for lucrative but unexplored potential advertisers. The visibility of African American consumers escalated to an undeniable position among the trendsetter and buyer platforms, leading Vogue to catch on and recognize the capital and cultural benefits of approaching the audience with an open mind.

While Vogue appeared to embrace the new leverage of Black consumers, it's engagement was most often more tactical than authentic. Vogue's recognition of this demographic presented little concern for genuine racial equity, and more interest based on the profit from a newly identified market. Selective inclusion exemplified the fashion and beauty industries attempt to address racial biases on the surface without addressing biases by design or structural racism. Revlon's Crème of Nature campaign demonstrates

how big brands often struggled and often failed to create meaningful connections with Black audiences. In his 1998 work, Bond cites the campaign as an illustration of the perils of making universal assumptions because something has a particular cultural reference. The hair cream media was expecting to be successful off the image of Revlon as a glamorous brand and because did not target a campaign specifically towards African-American women, and this level of urban market size of three million African American women, at least, selected an African-American focus group moderator to come to understand the audience. However, the limits of branding was demonstrated, while participants still classified Revlon as a "big white company" (Joiner, 2006). The use of light skinned models, with hair extensions, distanced the consumers because both described their unrepresentativeness (and complicity), and were for an issue of misreading hair texture. How the Revlon brand was on the actual packaging was perceived as a barrier and not a stamp of quality. Revlon (actually never) meaningfully engaged their intended market; while projecting their commercial identity at a market they did not understand.

Revlon would likely have avoided marketing errors if it had considered a warning that Zebra Advertising reported as long ago as 1970. Zebra advertising was one of the first African-American advertising agencies in New York City. Zebra advertising pointedly stated: "Mass advertising is color blind. It treats the Black consumer as though he were somebody's fair-haired boy. It speaks to him a language foreign to him. It offers him Great White Hopes. It places him in off-color unrealistic environments. Companies that have figured this out have gone into frantic colorful advertising and colored mass advertising Black. But it is not Black, it just looks that way to the people that make it" (Kern-Foxworth, 1994, p. 167). This critique of shallow representation

was consistent with the recommendations KB&P made to Revlon concerning the failed Crème of Nature campaign. KB&P recommended that the Revlon name be dropped altogether or minimally. KB&P also stated that they wanted to showcase multiple Black models to indicate the true heterogeneity within the Black community. As Bond (1998) described, consumers viewed these changes favorably, interpreting the brand's approach as a sincere attempt by Revlon to comprehend and acknowledge their needs and representative selves in ways consistent with consumer choices, instead of representational tokenism.

The Revlon Creme of Nature campaign illustrates the value of true engagement and insight into various consumer markets. The case represents how not acknowledging the different cultural and social contexts of African-Americans can result in a marketing failure. On the other hand, companies can not only make strides to improve their brand awareness, but also develop an overall inclusive fashion and cosmetics industry when they listen to and value the diversity of the difference between the markets. Understanding these markets fits a larger moment in historical context around the Black Power Movement and one of the emerging characteristics of targeted marketing - that you need to be authentic and cognizant of their culture in the advertising.

The true power of movements like the Black Power Movement, The Battle of Versailles, and even the use of Black models on covers of women’s magazines and their effect on consumers and the marketplace, is undeniable. The rise of Black-owned businesses and advocacy for representation in fashion provided an important challenge to established advertising strategies and to major companies. As evidenced by Revlon, true inclusivity goes well beyond the surface of representation, but rather, it involves ultimately understanding and respecting the unique experiences and perspectives of the

audience you're trying to reach. Building this rapport with consumers will encourage customer loyalty, while also creating a fair and more balanced marketplace that demonstrates the societal shift to more inclusive and engaging communities.

Vogue made a cultural statement and a marketing decision by placing Beverly Johnson on the cover. This was during a time when the buying power of different 'demographics' was coming to light in the world of fashion, and several other publications had already published a Black woman on their cover and therefore, it was not a risky move for Vogue. Vogue was leveraging the moment to reposition itself. Fashion magazines were dedicating more focus to showcasing a model of color on their covers because they were trying to increase their representation across all races and ethnicities. There was also a new market and distraction in the Black consumer-market for brands and advertisers to tap into. Black magazines, advertisers, and media are in demand and for Vogue in their effort to pivot and earn play in a format that allowed for the sales, ad dollars, and respect from consumers was readily available. By providing a Black model on its cover, Vogue would attract the consumers who are wanting representation and respect. Although Vogue's strategy was a corporate and marketing decision to increase magazine sales and new ad revenues from companies that were looking to attract the new emerging audiences, it also put the magazine into a position of being progressive and inviting (especially after other magazines had obviously been successful). As advertisers and brands characterize themselves as new and edgy to earn sales from the younger individuals in the 40-50+ demographic, and possibly attract audiences who are looking for socially and ethically responsible actions from brands, Vogue's decision was more likely to earn them significant revenues from ad dollars and sales of the magazine from brands looking to do the same and attach themselves to a

respected entity. Vogue made a calculated decision on branding, marketing, accumulating market share, and making money in a different social, ethical, and inclusive realm.

Despite the historical cover, Johnson recounts the experience negatively. “In the 70s, there weren't any black makeup artists or black hairdressers, so they really didn't know how to manage my hair. And as far as makeup goes, there weren't many foundations made for people of color. Not only that, the actual film that the photographer shot did not have a spectrum color for people of color. So it was an industry that was tailored around the White, blue eyed, blonde woman. That was the American ideal of beauty at the time. "That was the girl next door, not Beverly Johnson," (Vogue, 2020). Furthermore, the expression "Our American Look," was seen as tokenistic to many; that is, displaying a Black woman was just that; a charade, not a serious long term commitment of actual representation. The question is whether Vogue intended to embrace inclusion, or whether they were merely engaging in a trend. Using the word "Our" implies shared ownership, however, "our" could be interpreted as appropriating Black beauty, the fashion industry is largely mainstreamed into the power structures of Whiteness, by attempting to incorporate multiple beauty standards into that system without addressing oppressive structures. By stating that Johnson was "Our American Look," Vogue was attempting to make a prophetic statement about evolving beauty standards without any real intentions.

After the August 1974 Vogue issue, Johnson continued to pose for the magazine for the rest of the decade. She appeared on the cover of numerous other magazines including Glamour, French Elle, and Cosmopolitan, becoming a bona-fide star. Johnson

also became a major presence on the runway, breaking down racial barriers for fashion designers such as Yves Saint Laurent, Valentino, Calvin Klein, and Ralph Lauren.

Beverly Johnson's trailblazing Vogue cover in 1974 was a product of the intersection of social, political, and economic changes in the United States, and, by extension, in the fashion industry. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements' successes, the economic empowering of Blacks, and the fashion industry's own evolution to seek more diversity created an opportunity for her to be featured on the cover. That along with the transition of Mirabella as editor-in-chief of Vogue US, the financial gain of placing Black women on magazine covers, and the success of The Battle of Versailles, could be said to have set the stage for Johnson's iconic cover. This represented not just a historic moment in fashion, but a larger movement toward racial equality and cultural representation in America. "I think that the floodgates really opened up. Because if you don't see someone, and you don't sit down and talk to someone, then they can't be part of your world. And so we really became a part of the fabric of fashion in America, because we were being seen on the covers and in the pages. But now I think it's important that we participate in the economics of those industries that are making money off of our cultural talents," Johnson remarked. Beverly Johnson also covered US Vogue again in June 1975. A year after she originally did. By 1975, only a year after the first cover, every major American designer was using Black models (Gross, 1995).

CHAPTER 4

FROM TOKENISM TO RECKONING

In March 2009, when Michelle Obama graced the cover of Vogue for the first time as First Lady, it was a moment that felt historic, yet, for many, it also felt long overdue. The cover even read “The First Lady The World’s Been Waiting For”. The photo of her warm smile, in a simple but striking purple Jason Wu gown, was not just about fashion. The cover cast Black womanhood as intellectually powerful, sophisticated, and politically engaged, beyond physical beauty. For many, it was a long-awaited moment of recognition; still, it felt like a milestone, a moment where history had finally caught up to the changing times.

A month later, Beyoncé appeared on the cover, not as a political figure, but as a cultural force, again, reinforcing, in many ways, the idea of powerful Black womanhood, but from a completely different angle. In addition to being an entertainer, Beyoncé was depicted on this cover as a multidimensional force, an artist, businesswoman, and cultural icon who had performed at Obama's inauguration ball, the Oscars, and was set to go on a global tour that year. The headline, "At Her Best," emphasized her artistic prime, framing her as an untouchable global superstar. Wearing a blue Givenchy gown with straight, sleek hair tied back, Beyoncé's look was glamour incarnate. Together, these back-to-back covers seemed to signal a shift in Vogue’s visual politics. For many, however, these appearances were bittersweet. While they were certainly a breakthrough for Black diversity in one of the most elite fashion spaces, they also marked the boundaries of this type of inclusion; Beyoncé and Obama were exceptional figures, Black women whose success had already

Figure 2. Beyoncé & Michelle Obama Vogue U.S. Covers, 2009 (top) 2013 (bottom)

transcended race in the public imagination. Their presence affirmed Vogue's interest in Black inclusion, but only under the terms of exceptionalism and commercial palatability.

Four years later, in 2013, Beyoncé and Michelle Obama once again appeared back-to-back on the covers of Vogue, this time Michelle in April and Beyoncé in March. This intentional encore, after they each appeared on the cover in 2009, underscored Vogue's reliance on these two women (and many others) as symbols of its commitment to diversity. By 2013, Michelle Obama was an established global icon of political power, and Beyoncé's influence had stretched into a powerful nexus of artistry, activism, and entrepreneurship. Their tenacity was a reflection, both of the magazine's recognition of their unmatched cultural capital, but also of the unimaginative scope of Vogue's Black inclusion. Appearing on the cover of Vogue wasn't going to upend the inherent dynamics of the fashion industry or question its long history of exclusion; it was just going to call attention to one specific kind of Black womanhood that White mainstream culture could accept and commodify.

In this chapter, I trace the historical arc of Vogue's early gestures of Black inclusion to its performative diversity practices. By examining certain covers, industry politics, and public criticism, I analyze Vogue U.S.'s attempts to manage the tension between elite branding and racial accountability in the digital age. I argue that Vogue's increased focus on featuring Black women on its covers during the late 2000s and 2010s was a calculated reaction to changing marketplace and cultural shifts and not necessarily an honest embrace of diversity. The regular featuring of Black celebrities like Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, Rihanna, and many others in the magazine indicated a type of

conditional inclusion, in which being Black was only acceptable when represented as exceptional and meeting high standards of success and beauty.

I illustrate how the history of Vogue embodies the conflict between structural change and market-driven inclusion through qualitative content and discourse analysis of select covers, public disputes, and editorial tactics. I argue that Vogue's changing Black visibility is a site of cultural struggle, characterized by both gatekeeping and resistance, where the magazine balances the conflicting demands of brand preservation and racial accountability, drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation and hegemony. The chapter is a close reading that considers the sociopolitical contexts of the time and how Vogue's decisions were influenced by changes in consumer culture, media, race, and gender. Lastly, the chapter asks whether Black women's inclusion into Vogue is tokenism or authentic and whether and how it subverts and reifies dominant cultural and beauty norms. The chapter thus illuminates the complex interrelationships between power, race, and commerce within the fashion media's age of digitalization, placing Vogue's racial politics within the broader shifts in media, celebrity culture, and social activism.

4.1 Surviving The Digital Shift

During the 80s and 90s, the luxury fashion industry experienced a significant trend towards conglomeration, following the expansion of designer-led luxury brands. In 1987, Bernard Arnault, who supported Christian Lacroix's expansion, created LVMH (Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton), today a giant of the luxury industry with renowned brands such as Dior, Céline, and Louis Vuitton. Similarly, Richemont was formed in 1988 and has since acquired renowned fashion, watch, and jewelry houses, including

Chloé. François Pinault, too, through his holding company Kering (then Pinault-Printemps-Redoute), invested in the Gucci Group, moving on to include Yves Saint Laurent, Stella McCartney, and Alexander McQueen, among others, into its fold. It was a new moment for the world of fashion as luxury conglomerates made their grasp felt, shaping the new visage of high fashion.

In the 1980s, shopping emerged as a common source of recreation, as was reflected in the 76% increase in U.K. retail sales between 1980 and 1987 (Godfrey, 1990). This period saw a more explicit connection emerge between wealth and fashion. As Marie Claire noted in 1988, “The rich no longer need to slink about in the shadow of Presbyterian disapproval. They are welcomed. They are fashionable. They are role models” (September 1988, p. 54). In spite of the economic downturn of the early 1990s, aspirational lifestyles continued to be advertised by luxury fashion houses, with designers like Tom Ford at Gucci playing a key role in promoting this ideology (Best, 2017). The fashion magazines expanded into Asian and Eastern European markets, echoing the global spread of Western fashion chains and the overall cultural dominance of the West. As these brands grew in scope, so too did their presence within media. The surge in fashion media coverage during the 1980s can be attributed to the huge advertising revenue generated by these brands (Best, 2017). By the 1990s, fashion had become firmly established as a center of cultural discussion.

The perceived connection between luxury fashion and wealth elevated fashion to a status symbol and a force in culture. As Montfort (2004) described, "In the 1980s fashion became a star like those who engendered it.". The magazine economy proliferated exponentially. Visuality became a defining feature of the trade, fueled not only by a deluge of fashion advertising but by the rise of MTV and the music video as a

leading image-forming medium. Advances in affordable printing technologies during the 1980s enabled Vogue to produce ad-crammed issues, its most iconic one being its anchor September issue (Coleridge, 1988). As fashion businesses expanded globally, and television and print media emerged, the balance between fashion media and the fashion world steadily shifted toward advertisers. More efforts at PR and higher advertising budgets gave more power to brands over magazines. By the mid-1990s, this shift was reflected in the massive commercial success of designers. Time estimated Giorgio Armani's brand was worth $1 billion, while Polo Ralph Lauren had reached $1.7 billion in value (Agins, 2001).

Print magazines' business model, which had long prospered on monopolizing high-end fashion content and advertiser-governed exclusivity, was threatened by the development and widespread use of digital technology towards the end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st. With the advent of the internet came the ability to spread fashion content instantly, threatening the exclusivity that had defined Vogue and its competitors. By the 2000s, fashion companies shifted their advertising budget to online media, where they could have more targeted consumer engagement at a fraction of the cost.

Fashion blogs of the early 2000s introduced yet another disruptive element, bringing fashion reporting to anybody who had internet connection and disrupting the prevailing model created by print media conglomerates. As McRobbie (1998) and Polan (2006) observe, the increasing dominance of public relations within fashion journalism had already created a more commodity-driven mediascape; the digital revolution simply accelerated it. No longer was fashion discourse controlled by the elite Vogue editors, but instead, independent bloggers, enabled via media, gave raw and unmediated

coverage. Bruzzi and Church Gibson (2013) highlight how fast fashion, aided by online culture, reduced Vogue's curatorial power even more.

Webgraphics accelerated this process, allowing customers to bypass media conventionally and communicate directly with fashion brands and influencers (Best, 2017). Customers did not require a monthly magazine to tell them what was trendy if they could have instant fashion inspiration from the internet. In fact, the rapid growth of websites also contributed to the demise of several young women's targeted print publications, such as *Mademoiselle* (2001), *Teen* (2008), *Elle Girl* (2006), and *Cosmo Girl* (2008), which were discontinued with the increasing popularity of web-based content among this demographic.

4.2 Anna Wintour

Against this backdrop of technological upheaval and shifting consumer behavior, Anna Wintour plucked the title of editor-in-chief of Vogue US from Grace Mirabella in 1988. Mirabella was ousted “as abruptly as Ms.Vreeland had been before her” (Messinger, 2021) by Condé Nast executives, who aimed to give the publication a more appealing and commercially successful image. (Miralles, 2021). This was a seismic shift in the focus of the magazine, both visually and strategically. Mirabella's vision had been centered on the reflection of women's lived experience in a changing social and political climate, striking a balance between stories on fashion, recipes, and issues of feminism; she was persistently criticized as being "too vanilla" (Miralles, 2021). Enter Anna Wintour, whose reputation as a cold yet ambitious force in the industry preceded her (Miralles, 2021). Her rise reflected the wider cultural shifts in fashion and media, where entertainment and branding mixed to create a new model for

relevance. Grace Mirabella's exit from Vogue in 1988 marked more than just a change in leadership; it underscored the end of a time defined by practicality and relatability.

When Mirabella took over in the 1970s, she was regarded as a practical editor whose reign coincided with great social upheaval. The Vietnam War, Women's Liberation Movement, and economic instability influenced her editorial style, which sought to ground fashion in the daily lives of Vogue readers (Miralles, 2021). Her inclusion of feminist icons like Gloria Steinem and disparate music influences like punk and hip-hop demonstrated she believed women could care about politics as well as aesthetics (Messinger, 2021). She notably remarked, "We must change our focus. From dress-up fantasy to real life". Her time in office, nevertheless, has been labeled "the beige years," critiqued as bereft of the sheen and make-believe of fashion journalism. Her Vogue was "middle-class" (as quoted in Paul, 2022) according to Andy Warhol, indicating a lack of alignment between her editorial agenda and the desires of the fashion magazine's high-end stakeholders.

Editors at Vogue were influential way before Wintour was editor, yet, out of them all, her power was unmatched. In a 2011 Wall Street Journal article, journalist Joshua Levine cited that Wintour's influence had extended far beyond editorial work, for which she became a power broker and figure at the center of the fashion world. The influence of fashion journalists had always been significant, but with personalities such as Wintour, the influence became even larger, elevating the editor's position to that of strategic industry leader. As McDowell (1994) remarked, "Designers are only as good as fashion arbiters believe they are". It was Wintour who advised LVMH's Bernard Arnault to hire Marc Jacobs as a designer for Louis Vuitton, for example. Beyond editorial decision-making, she also played a crucial role in supporting emerging talent,

offering both personal backing and institutional support through the CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund, which she launched in the aftermath of 9/11 (Best, 2017).

When Wintour was appointed editor-in-chief of Vogue in 1988, the magazine's covers reflected a very formulaic approach to fashion and beauty. As Wintour herself described in a 2024-penned Vogue article, "They often cropped in very close to the face, big hair, big makeup, big jewelry, and very ornate." These covers catered to the opulence and excess that characterized much of 1980s fashion but lacked the forward-thinking creativity Wintour felt was necessary to reinvigorate the magazine. The covers featured healthy, smiling, all-American girls, which became icons of femininity, mediated by a focus on well-being that emerged in the 1970s, which Mirabella championed (Best, 2017). She knew that the covers not only failed to address the contemporary woman but also did not give Vogue the power to frame cultural discussion. Wintour thought there was an opportunity to reinvent Vogue as an avant-garde publication that could reflect and create contemporary style in its own terms. To forge the transformation, Wintour realized that she needed to break from tradition and pull out all the stops, starting with her first few covers. To become relevant again, the covers had to escape the stuffy, formulaic covers of the past and embrace a more dynamic, aspirational worldview of fashion. This meant bringing new things: unprecedented styling, challenging photography, and most importantly, globally celebrated stars. Wintour's mission was to appeal not only to fashion insiders but to a broader audience that needed to buy, read, and aspire to the magazine.

4.3 A Calculated (Celebrity) Shift

Wintour's first cover as editor-in-chief, in November 1988, was a deliberate and dramatic break with the past. Instead of a close-up, studio-lit portrait of a model's face, she opted for a body shot of model Michaela Bercu with a Christian Lacroix haute couture jacket over a pair of stonewashed Guess jeans, a high-low fashion combination unheard of for a cover at the time. In her Vogue article recalling shooting the cover, Wintour (2012) wrote, “What none of us expected was to run that picture on the cover, least of all the magazine’s printers, who called up and asked with some consternation, ‘Has there been a mistake?” I couldn’t blame them. It was so unlike the studied and elegant close-ups that were typical of Vogue’s covers back then, with tons of makeup and major jewelry. This one broke all the rules." This rule-bending, daring cover not only launched Wintour's groundbreaking vision for Vogue but signaled that she was committed to redefining the boundaries of fashion media from the very beginning by making room for innovation and cultural relevance.

The change was a provocative, risky choice, and it signaled that Vogue under Wintour would break old-fashioned rules and redefine what luxury could mean. The debut cover was met with mixed reviews. Some defended it as revolutionary; others criticized it for abandoning the glossy perfection of Vogue. But everyone knew what Wintour's goal was: to disrupt the status quo and push the limits of fashion journalism. The cover was a turning point in her career, leading to her decades-long reign as editor-in-chief and signaling that she wouldn't hesitate to think outside the box to achieve what she saw for the magazine. It was the beginning of Wintour's legacy of innovation that continues to influence how Vogue lives and breathes today.

Despite the waves Anna Wintour made on her first Vogue cover, which already broke the magazine's traditional norms, it wasn't the biggest shakeup she made to the industry. That moment came in 1989, when Wintour decided to feature Madonna on the cover of Vogue. At that time, putting a celebrity on the cover of a high-end fashion magazine, especially one highly regarded for its single focus on models, was unheard of. In doing so, she not only broke convention but reshaped Vogue, putting it on a new trajectory as a turning point in the interaction between fashion, celebrity culture, and media. In the documentary In Vogue: The 90s (2024), Anna Wintour shares the moment she decided to put Madonna on the cover of the May 1989 issue. She recalls a man sitting next to her on an airplane, asking her what she did for a living. When she told him, he reportedly replied: “That’s the most incredible publication; it’s so chic, it’s so elegant, it represents everything I think of as being very classic and beautiful. It’s Katharine Hepburn, it’s Audrey Hepburn, it’s Grace Kelly, it would never be Madonna.”

For Wintour, his words were a challenge. Reflecting on her decision in the In Vogue (2024) documentary, “The fact that that very nice man that I sat next to on the plane thought that it would be completely wrong to put Madonna on the cover and completely out of keeping with the tradition of Vogue being this very classically correct publication pushed me to break the rules and had people talk about us in a way that was culturally relevant, important and controversial.” Throughout much of the 20th century, Vogue covers were dominated by models who embodied the aspirational aesthetics of the era, figures like Twiggy in the 1960s and Linda Evangelista in the 1990s. At the time, Madonna was both a global icon and a polarizing figure, making her an inherently risky choice for a magazine associated with traditional elegance. Wintour, however,

sought to reframe Madonna's public persona. She insisted on showcasing a simpler, understated version of the pop star, deliberately moving away from her over-the-top image. The result was a minimalist cover shot featuring Madonna in her own swimming pool, damp hair slicked back (with trademark blonde streak airbrushed out), red lips, and a simple white swimsuit with no accessories. This understated, elegant image was quite different from the Madonna the world was familiar with and summed up Wintour's concept for the magazine as elegant but provocative.

With Madonna, not only did Vogue's role in the culture shift, but it also foreshadowed the celebrity-filled era of fashion journalism. It reflected Wintour's sharp understanding of Vogue's dual roles as tastemaker and commercial powerhouse, causing the magazine to be relevant in an evolving media landscape. Wintour knew that, in Condé Nast's frequently merciless corporate culture, she would not have long to make her mark (Odell, 2022). To do so, she learned to take calculated editorial risks. Wintour wasn't particularly interested in celebrities, but she loved doing the unexpected, a trait that would direct her editorial decisions during her Vogue tenure. Madonna's cover wasn't so much a risk as a statement of intent, positioning Vogue as a magazine that would provoke, innovate, and position itself front-and-center. This groundbreaking choice cemented Wintour's reputation as a fashion revolutionary and rearranged the success metrics for fashion magazines worldwide. Indeed, the issue was a success, moving 200,000 more copies than the previous year's May issue and cementing the cultural reach of celebrities on magazine covers (Turner, 2022).

As fashion continued to become more identified with entertainment and popular culture, Wintour recognized the commercial potential of celebrity-driven content. This strategy not only backed Vogue's earnings but also aligned with the era's growing

obsession with celebrity and its commodification (Miralles, 2021). According to Bruzzi and Church Gibson (2013), "The appetite for fast fashion has been fuelled by the unprecedented power of celebrity culture, one of the most striking aspects of the new millennium." Vogue, in a way, created a new appetite for celebrity fashion where the marriage between fashion and celebrity was a commodified spectacle. As Montfort (2004) points out, the 1980s marked a shift in which fashion itself became a form of entertainment, heavily intertwined with music, film, and television. Vogue personified these shifts, with its focus on lifestyle and personality as the defining symbolic capital of fashion, anchored, as it would be in the new millennium, to celebrity. As Best (2017) notes, “The fashionable body has always been an artifice, but the individualization of this body through the prism of celebrity humanizes it as reality.”

This shift reflected broader cultural changes. Fashion was now "part of the cultural conversation," (quoted in Best, 2017), due in part to new inescapable links to celebrity figures. The increased commodification of celebrity, documented extensively in magazines, television, and, later, social media, aligned exactly with Vogue's new editorial strategy. Teen girls and young women, who once idolized models, now followed celebrity style with the same fervor (Bruzzi & Church Gibson, 2013). This transition helped Vogue maintain its aspirational allure while also attracting lucrative advertising from brands eager to capitalize on celebrity endorsements. Wintour certainly embraced, and helped legitimize, the fashion celebrity nexus, slowly replacing Vogue’s supermodel covers with celebrities in film, music, sports, and politics. By 2003, all 12 monthly issues of Vogue featured a celebrity cover (Best, 2017).

Anna Wintour also had a significant role in solidifying Hollywood's connection with Vogue. In addition to covering interviews, she turned the Met Gala into an

international celebrity event that combined high society, entertainment, and fashion (Best, 2017). The Met Gala, formally the Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute Benefit, is an annual benefit in New York City to raise funds for the museum's Costume Institute. It is regarded as the biggest night in fashion and the first night of the Costume Institute's spring exhibition (Friedman, 2022). Every year, the event has a certain theme related to the exhibition, which impacts the guests' extravagant and theatrical fashion. With Wintour's leadership, the MET Gala had become a leading money-generating spectacle (tickets cost around $75,000 as of 2024), and Wintour herself personally chose the guest list and ensured optimal media exposure. With its broadening beyond the fashion world, the Gala now rivals the Oscars in terms of media coverage, and in 2010, it raised a staggering $9 million (Best, 2017). This move reinforced Vogue's relevance, as it positioned the magazine not merely as a fashion publication but as a cultural tastemaker at the nexus of celebrity, art, and commerce. Despite these shifts in the fashion industry and fashion media, one constant remained: the remaining significance of The September Issue. As Vogue's most-awaited and commercially significant issue, it was crucial to maintain the magazine's financial success in addition to reflecting its cultural impact. Packed with high-profile advertisements and expansive editorial content, this issue consistently generated the highest revenue of the year, solidifying its status as Vogue’s most powerful asset.

4.4 The September Issue

Vogue's September edition holds a particularly significant position in the fashion industry and broader cultural discourse and is therefore of great importance in interpreting Black model representation in the evolving space of fashion media.

Referred to as the "fattest, most door-stopping magazine of the year" (Friedman, 2010), the September issue surpasses the boundaries of a typical fashion magazine to become a symbolic icon of editorial power and market influence. As the foundation of Vogue's annual publishing cycle, it defines the fashion year, builds narratives, creates trends, and reflects the issues of the fashion world as a whole (Steele, 1998; Coleridge, 1988). Due to its cultural and economic power, the September issue specifically reveals a lot about the issues of race, gender, and representation in high-fashion media.

Understanding the September issue is thus central to challenging Black representation at Vogue, particularly considering a Black celebrity had never covered the magazine before Halle Berry in 2010. Not only was her appearance monumental, but it was symbolic too, being an indicator of the magazine's changing, though still limited, approach to racial diversity. How then can we read Berry's appearance on this cover? Berry herself was aware of the significance of this moment, saying, "What that means for a woman of color and what that means in the fashion world, what that means to pop culture, there was no way I could say, 'No, I'm not going to be on the biggest issue of the year.'" (as quoted in Meter, 2010).

The September issue has long functioned as more than a visual celebration of style; it is an economic force that underscores how central advertising is to fashion publishing. The issue grew significantly under Anna Wintour's direction, culminating in the monumental 2007 edition, which weighed almost five pounds and is still the biggest magazine issue ever published (Konigsberg, 2009). The September issue retained its dominance, using its renowned status to sustain advertiser dollars, despite the fall in print media during the 2008 financial crisis (Friedman, 2010). With digital media beginning to change fashion consumption in the 2000s, the issue pivoted by including

print and digital campaigns coupling editorial content with social media, e-commerce, and branded

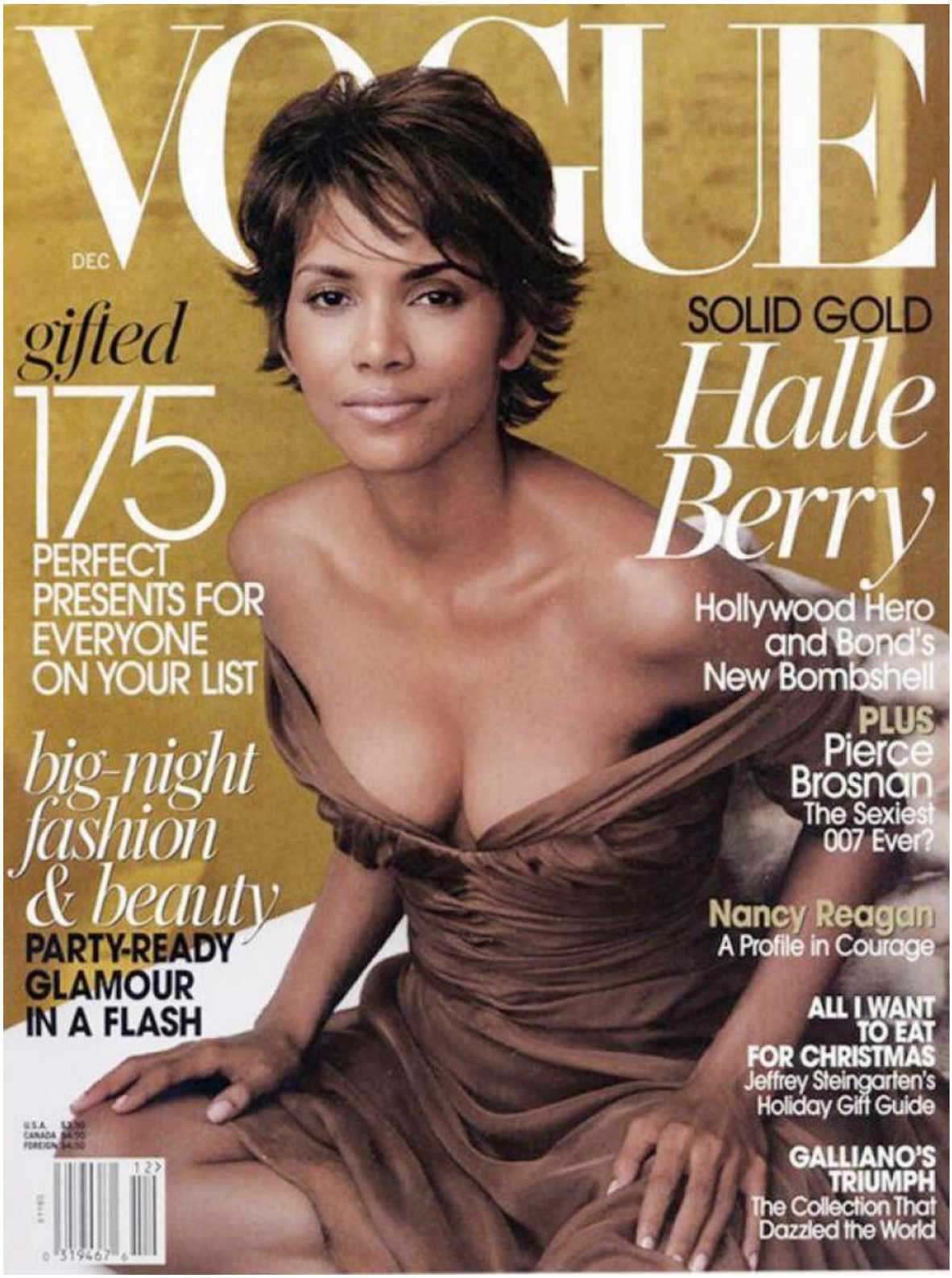

Figure 3. Halle Berry Vogue U.S. Cover, 2002

collaborations. The hybridity of the September issue highlights its role as a transitional object between print materiality and digital fluidity (Best, 2017).

The September issue is not only an economic relic, it is a cultural gauge that reflects Vogue's values, and how they relate to gender, race, and class. Under Grace Mirabella's leadership, the issue combined fashion with practicality and substance, keeping with her own belief that women could be fashionable and politically and socially aware (Miralles, 2021). Anna Wintour's tenure, by contrast, led the rise of celebrity culture as the dominant organizing principle of the magazine, using faces like Charlize Theron, Nicole Kidman, and Kate Hudson to expand readership and reinforce brand loyalty. This shift highlighted the commodification of celebrity with the fashion market's shift to equate cultural currency with stardom (Warner, 2015; McRobbie, 2009). But it also revealed the enduring racial exclusions built into these tactics: no Black celebrity had graced the cover of the September issue until 2010.

Photographed by Mario Testino, the cover featured Berry sporting a sleek short bob haircut, giving off an air of sophistication and modernity. She wore a Giorgio Armani black velvet cocktail dress, complemented with a Lorraine Schwartz black jade-and-diamond earring. Halle Berry's appearance that year was undeniably a milestone, but one fraught with complexity. As the first (and sole) African American woman to win the Academy Award for Best Actress, Berry was considered an exception, placing her in a position to be an acceptable consumable object for Vogue's largely White readership (Craig, 2002; Warner, 2015). Dressed in minimalist yet glamorous fashion, the cover helped showcase Berry as an A-list actress whose celebrity self and public persona aligned with the magazine's aesthetic and business decisions. Her cover was

organized not as a part of a greater movement toward inclusivity but as a singular achievement, an isolated burst of symbolic progress rather than a start for structural change. Black women are usually made visible in popular culture only after their identities uphold dominant ideals of beauty, success, and respectability (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Warner, 2015). Berry, already gracing the cover before, validated by Hollywood, and beloved by audiences, could be celebrated without disrupting Vogue's core values.

Berry's 2010 cover must be read in the context of Vogue's strategic response to growing criticisms about its lack of diversity. The magazine was under fire, particularly after its 2008 cover of Gisele Bündchen and LeBron James was heavily criticized for referencing racist imagery of King Kong (Samuels, 2010). Berry's appearance in 2010 functioned as a corrective gesture, one that acknowledged diversity while maintaining editorial control over how Blackness was framed. High fashion's inclusion of Black women is less about structural change and more about optics, according to fashion writer Tansy Hoskins (2014). Diversity is commodified so that it may be employed to make the brand attractive in order for it to have evidence to dispute its exclusionary practices.

Berry's visibility in Vogue's most coveted issue was a moment of visibility, yet at the same time an exemplar of the temporary status of Black inclusion within the hegemonic fashion media. It was a symbolic "triumph," one that did not stop questions about who gets represented, how, and why. This tension is consistent with Stuart Hall's (1981) definition of popular culture as a "constant battlefield," where containment and progress are mutually happening. Consistent with this, the September 2010 issue is a case study of cultural power: it reveals both the possibility and the limitation of racial

progress in a setting where visibility always must be negotiated in terms of market and cultural capital (Hall, 1981; McRobbie, 2009).

4.5 Who Are (Black) Celebrities?

Wintour's reliance on celebrities was as much a smart business decision as an editorial one. She addressed a media environment that was becoming more and more influenced by cross-platform visibility and mass appeal. Celebrities had enormous followings and a wider industry appeal compared to models, and thus were commercially viable for a magazine seeking to remain relevant and increase circulation in a threatened print media landscape.

Celebrities occupy a unique position in modern media and economies, functioning as both cultural icons and economic assets. According to Harvey (2017), celebrities' engagements with their fans are examples of "parasocial interaction" whereby familiarity and intimacy are established through mass media in the absence of personal relationships. Hall (1989) acknowledges that "the pleasure derived from popular culture is mediated by the audience's experience and cannot be divorced from the social context". This highlights the way audiences find personal meaning in their interactions with Black celebrities. This process imbues stars with great both cultural power as well as intense public scrutiny (Margolis, 1995). Black celebrities hold a particularly contentious position within the larger celebrity framework, both influencing and defying racial and cultural discourses. The roles of celebrities within media and the economy highlight Black celebrities' distinctive role and contribution as both commodifiable icons and ideological agents in brokering racialized discourse.

The inclusion of Black female celebrities on the covers of Vogue marked a small shift, reflecting little acknowledgment of growing demands for diversity. Halle Berry's 2010 September issue, for example, highlighted Vogue's slow embrace of Black representation after decades of exclusion. Her groundbreaking Vogue cover, which followed her historic Oscar nomination and win for Monster's Ball in 2002, was both a milestone for representation and an example of Vogue strategically placing itself alongside cultural momentum to enhance its reputation and sales.

Berry's cover in 2002 was significant because, as a leading Hollywood actress, she was the first (and so far, the only) Black woman to win the Academy Award for Best Actress, a win that exposed the legacy of exclusion of Black women in other fields. By placing her on the cover, Vogue was selling a narrative of progress, albeit limited. Halle Berry's Vogue cover for their December 2002 edition presented her in a sleek, sophisticated aesthetic, which reinforced her as an A-list star. Dressing her up in a beautiful gown against a gold backdrop reemphasized her status as an elite of Hollywood. The text on the cover, read "solid gold" and "gifted," celebrating her Oscar win while subtly framing this achievement as exceptional instead of representative of broad, sweeping changes in how Black women are represented.

While Vogue was seemingly celebrating Berry's historic win, it did not champion diversity until it aligned with mainstream approval and was deemed a "safe" approach. Berry's Oscar nomination and win gave Vogue a marketable opportunity to feature a Black woman on the cover without being radical. Instead of a raw, bold, or groundbreaking portrayal, Vogue styled her in a way that fit within the magazine's traditional Eurocentric beauty standards. While the cover was historic, Vogue's track record on diversity had been poor for years. The magazine had only featured very few

Black women up to that point, so Berry's representation was counted as an exception rather than a new shift in the industry. Although Halle Berry's cover was a step towards progress in inclusivty, it also showed how high fashion media takes advantage of diversity without aiming for more significant change. These choices helped diversify Vogue's readership and placed it in a culturally relevant place. They were merely symbolic and did not represent a concerted effort to tackle Black women's systematic exclusion from the fashion industry.

Celebrities' power is not limited to just entertainment; they are essential drivers of consumer economies. Dyer & McDonald (1989) argue that stars are produced by media industries as economic commodities to perform functions like selling films, music, fashion, and consumer goods. The reason for their popularity is their ability to embody the promise of aspiration and individuality while being commodified products. Celebrities also create new capitalist formations, shaping and reshaping industries with the aim of maintaining consumer interest (Dyer & McDonald, 1989). Beyoncé, for instance, is a great example of this. Cashmore (2010) discusses that she is not only human but also an "ambulant brand," a symbol of consumerist power that crosses racial boundaries and enhances modern understandings of success and agency. Even Beyoncé herself stated in her 2009 Vogue interview, “I’m large enough, I’m universal enough that no one’s paying attention to what race I am. I’ve proven myself. I’ve passed that.” (as quoted in Meter, 2009). At the same time, celebrities' cultural capital makes it possible for them to change or reinforce social norms. Celebrities engage in ideological production as public figures by influencing identity discourse, power dynamics, and a sense of belonging. Stuart Hall’s theory of media as ideological sites emphasizes how mass media perpetuates knowledge systems that reflect the interests of the powerful.

Journalists, such as those who work at Vogue, also act as ideological gatekeepers, framing news to promote specific moral and cultural evaluations (Shoemaker, Vos, & Reese, 2009; Jackson, 2014).

Black celebrities, even within the same celebrity sphere, face unique challenges and opportunities grounded in racialized debates. As noted by Jackson (2014), their inclusion in the media is not necessarily indicative of progress. Instead, Black stars are subject to limited acceptance, which attests to ongoing inequalities and limited entry and exposure in the majority of domains. Popular discourse situates Black stars as being either paragons of virtue or embodying deviance, reifying dichotomies of "acceptable" vs. "threatening" Blackness (Alexander-Flyod, 2021). Such ideological policing is an expression of broader societal configurations that make up Blackness vis-à-vis normative Whiteness.

Black celebrities possess a special ability to challenge these kinds of narratives. They have the power to alter prevailing racialized narratives through their visibility and cultural output. Beyoncé, again, is a prime example of this. As Kooijman (2019) points out, despite her transcending categories coded as "Black," Beyoncé still clashes with the need to account for her Blackness within public spaces. After 2013, she shifted to intersectional politics, using events like the 2016 Super Bowl halftime show to elevate social justice and racial equality to the forefront of entertainment capitalism. Cashmore (2010) highlights the continuous pressure on Black celebrities to conform to White cultural norms, echoing Jan Nederveen Pieterse's (1990) argument that White culture only recognizes Black excellence insofar as it adheres to normative conformity. This conflict highlights the vulnerable position of Black celebrities in a culture shaped by racial inequality.

The commercial viability of Black celebrities plays a critical role in their impact. Stars, Dryer (1986) states, are at the center of consumer society and drive the consumption of everything from fashion to technology. Rihanna is an ideal example of this, leveraging her cultural capital to become a cross-industry force. Rihanna's Fenty Beauty brand showcases how one can disrupt beauty culture by placing Black women front and center in an otherwise Eurocentric industry. This economic success reinforces their cultural significance while challenging traditional hierarchies of power.

Vogue and other fashion magazines have capitalized on Black celebrities' marketability to increase sales and stay culturally relevant. The fact that Naomi Campbell, in 1989, became the first Black woman to grace the magazine's September cover indicates that Wintour and Vogue have previously tried to capitalize on the cultural relevance of Black icons. These moments, however, also highlight the limitations of representation within predominantly White institutions. Black stars must balance a delicate tightrope between challenging hegemonic narratives and conforming to the rules of acceptability established by these very narratives (Jackson, 2014).

Celebrities are powerful cultural and economic forces because they embody the contradictions and ambitions of modern consumer society. Black celebrities, in particular, occupy a unique space where they both challenge and navigate racialized discourses, redefining cultural norms while operating within structures of commodification. Performers such as Beyoncé and Rihanna demonstrate how Black celebrities can be used to change industries and create new narratives. Yet, as Jackson (2014) and Cashmore (2010) put it, their success must be understood in terms of long-standing systemic inequalities that continue to frame their lives.

4.6 Tokenism & Exceptionality

For years, Vogue had been criticized for its lack of diversity, especially in terms of its cover models. While a few Black women, such as Rihanna, Seren Williams, and Lupita Nyong'o, had appeared on the cover, these moments were often isolated and infrequent. During the period 2000 to 2010, there were seven successive non-continuous years in which no Black cover models featured on Vogue. It was as though Black women could only enter the most exclusive fashion worlds if they adhered to the very norms which had kept them out all these years: they had to be extraordinary, praised for their looks and success within the rigid parameters of what the (White) fashion world found viable and desirable. To this end, the back-to-back Michelle Obama and Beyoncé covers the chapter discussed in the introduction were a powerful moment of representation, but they were also a reminder of the limited and often tokenistic nature of that representation. Both women were already famous, and Vogue could (and did) capitalize on their fame to maintain its relevance in a media environment that was changing.

This exchange is representative of a larger, more complex issue at the intersection of race, gender, and media representation, reflecting Stuart Hall's argument on popular culture as a constant battlefield. The Michelle Obama and Beyoncé covers were a moment in time when the fashion industry was being compelled to confront its practices of exclusion under pressure of growing cultural awareness of racial inequality. Yet this shift also reveals a deeper, at times painful truth: Vogue's acceptance of diversity was not merely the product of a commitment to social justice but was shaped by market forces. With print sales dropping and digital markets rising, the magazine wanted to stay relevant by breaking free of its traditional roles and embracing the

cultural moment. Black women were being included, not because they represented the full spectrum of Blackness, because their celebrity was in line with the commercial and cultural needs of the era. This limited visibility serves to underscore Hall's theory of the "unequal struggle" in popular culture, as the dominant culture continuously works to contain definitions of inclusion within dominant, often exclusionary, norms. While these covers undoubtedly represented progress, they also highlight the ongoing cultural struggle, where Black women's inclusion within mainstream media is still dependent on their ability to meet particular commercial and cultural standards. To Black designers and models who were yet to achieve worldwide recognition, the way Vogue managed diversity was persistently exclusionary and validated Hall's notion of strategic positions being won and lost in the battle over cultural space. In many ways, the March and April 2009 Vogue covers both represented a breakthrough and a barrier, a breakthrough in that they were two strong Black women taking up space on a traditionally exclusive platform, and a barrier in that they were reflective of the fashion world's tendency to invite Black figures only when they had reached a level of exceptionalism such that they could no longer be ignored or dismissed. The question, therefore, is whether these moments of visibility are ultimately revolutionary or simply a reflection of the way in which Vogue, and fashion in general, has responded tactically to changing social and market pressures without challenging its history of exclusion.

In the 1990s, supermodels like Naomi Campbell broke glass ceilings by appearing on Vogue covers, challenging Eurocentric beauty ideals. However, by the 2000s, Black models were absent from these covers, replaced by celebrities whose fame guaranteed commercial success. Fleetwood (2015) argues that such increased commodification of Black stardom is proof of a broader history of Black body

exploitation in the interest of business. While this inclusion marked a notable shift, this progress was tied to the rising visibility of exceptional Black cultural figures rather than a systemic embrace of diversity. Vogue capitalized on Black women's celebrity status, opting for them over regular Black models while maintaining White makeup artists, stylists, photographers, designers, assistants, and staff. This reveals the political, economic, and cultural dynamics informing Vogue's editorial decisions in the 2000s. This strategy by the magazine fed into tokenism and consolidated embedded biases as they benefited economically from Black celebrities' exposure.

During the 2000s, Black women made regular appearances on the cover of Vogue, but solely in relation to their outstanding achievements. 7 of the 120 covers over the decade featured Black women: Marion Jones (Jan. 2001), Halle Berry (Dec. 2002, Sept. 2010), Liya Kebede (May 2005), Jennifer Hudson (Mar. 2007), Michelle Obama (Mar. 2009), and Beyoncé (Apr. 2009). They were celebrated for their achievements in sports, film, politics, and music, which fed into the idea that Black women's worth of mainstream visibility rested on extraordinary accomplishment. The narratives reveal a complex relationship between visibility, marketability, and cultural power. Each of these covers was a landmark, portraying their characters as isolated individuals whose tales transcended racial boundaries. However, they also revealed lingering biases in how Black beauty was framed within the Eurocentric ideals of high fashion.

Despite their historical significance, these covers were criticized, especially for the way they portrayed skin tone and hairstyle, which seemed to conform to Western, White ideals of beauty. For example, Marion Jones, who won three gold medals at the 2000 Summer Olympics and set a new world record, was featured on the cover of Vogue's January 2001 issue. Styled in a sleek, long red gown and standing on a

reflective surface, Jones was described as "Greater Than Gold" and "The New American Hero." Jennifer Hudson's March 2007 cover came in the wake of her record-breaking Academy Award win for Dreamgirls, where she earned acclaim for her groundbreaking work. The cover line, "America's Dream Girl," named her performance outright, making Hudson the height of the American dream, from American Idol fame to Hollywood royalty. Wearing a classic satin print burgundy gown with straightened flowy hair, the cover showed Hudson in clothes reminiscent of Vogue's high-fashion aesthetic. Both covers drew criticism for their representation of Jones' and Hudson's bodies, where Jones can be seen covering her athletic form with her hands, and Hudson's collarbones were highlighted to give the appearance of thinness. This emphasized Vogue's reluctance to present unfiltered

Figure 4. Jennifer Hudson March Cover, 2007 (left) Marion Jones January Cover, 2001 (right)

Blackness (Summers, 2017). The choices revealed a trend in fashion media of concealing Blackness in a way that would be aesthetically acceptable to a predominantly White audience, without fully embracing the spectrum of Black identity. The covers resonated with audiences as a celebration of Black success in Hollywood, but also showed the limitations of fashion media fully affirming different bodies.

This is in line with what Summers (2017) calls "image activism," where diversity is promoted by an individual as opposed to institutional reform. Beyoncé and Michelle Obama, two well-known figures, positioned Blackness as marketable, satisfying the demands of late capitalism at the expense of tackling issues on representation and inclusion. Black stardom is therefore a prime example of capitalistic meritocracy, reflecting the American dream of success while concealing systemic inequality (Fleetwood, 2015). The selective inclusion of Black women on Vogue covers also showcases what Warner (2017) calls "plastic representation," a superficial increase in visibility that prioritizes quantity over meaningful engagement with racial and cultural nuances. Vogue's Black celebrities boosted sales and drew in a diverse readership without having to address the structural issues Black models and creatives face in the industry.

The financial incentives of Vogue's cover decisions reveal the balancing act between representation and marketability. Economically, these covers were calculated, surfing the celebrity of Black stars in order to appeal to a broader audience, but were also gesturing toward the magazine's reliance on marketable "safe" characters, reinforcing tokenism in its diversity strategy. Engaging with prominent Black celebrities like Beyoncé and Halle Berry allowed Vogue to tap into the purchasing power of different groups without losing any cultural capital. Summers (2017) states that

inclusion of Blackness in high-end fashion spaces generally exists to answer demands for diversity without disrupting existing hierarchies. This can be seen in Rocamora's (2001) analysis of fashion media as producers of symbolic value. By showcasing exceptional Black women, Vogue constructed a narrative of progress that conformed to its brand narrative yet reinforced the elitism of high fashion. Blackness was made commercially viable as a tool of economic investment, something that undermined representation as a promise of diversity but pushed it as a tactic instead.

While more Black women were gracing the cover of Vogue, the magazine's approach was, more often than not, tokenistic. Tokenism, as Wright & Taylor (1998) write, involves symbolic inclusion without a genuine commitment to systemic change. Despite praising Black women's accomplishments, Vogue never cemented their place in the mainstream fashion media. The emphasis on exceptionalism continued to highlight that Black women needed to surpass regular standards in order to be deserving of representation. As Summers (2017) points out, this approach abbreviates the redemptive potential of diversity campaigns in construing inclusion as a reward for individual excellence instead of a celebration of diversity in society. This created an environment in which the dependence on celebrities overshadowed the contributions of Black creatives and models, perpetuating the exclusion of Blackness from the everyday aesthetics of high fashion behind the camera.

The limitations of Vogue's inclusivity were further highlighted by structural barriers within the fashion industry. The fact that the majority of stylists, photographers, and editorial staff are White attests to the institutionalized bias that comes to determine Vogue's visual and editorial content. Without addressing these issues, the magazine's efforts at presenting Black women will always remain superficial. To move beyond

tokenism, Vogue has to embrace an approach of inclusivity that addresses structural inequalities. This would involve diversifying decision-making tables, increasing Black women's cover representation, and defying Eurocentric standards of beauty that still dominate fashion media. Representation, Summers (2017) contends, needs to move beyond the individual to reimagine the concept of Blackness in fashion. True progress is not in the visibility of famous individuals, but rather the broad-scale normalization of Black beauty and creativity. Vogue has the economic and cultural capital to drive such a change, but ensuring that it is done requires commitment towards systematic rather than commodity-driven diversity.

Black women's appearance on Vogue covers throughout the 2000s showcases both the advancements and limitations of tokenism within fashion. While these covers marked milestones in Black visibility, they reveal a strategic move by Vogue to balance cultural relevance with commercial success, often through high-profile Black celebrities. With covers featuring celebrities like Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, and Jennifer Hudson, Vogue capitalized on the commodification of Blackness by using their marketability to different demographics while reinforcing biases that prioritize fame and conformity over true inclusion. This selective visibility emphasizes Black liminality in fashion spaces, where visibility is conditional and portrayed as the exception rather than the rule. By making tokenistic gestures toward diversity without addressing the deeper exclusions of Black models and creatives in the industry, Vogue reveals how Black excellence is framed as a means of maintaining the status quo rather than as systemic inclusion. Its approach works to highlight the need for structural change beyond performative representation to allow for more genuine inclusivity that embraces the full scope of Black beauty, talent, and creativity.

This is a part of a greater issue found in Black representation: Black individuals are welcomed as exceptional, yet not fully systemically included (Alexander-Floyd, 2021). Black photographers, makeup artists, models, and editors are notably underrepresented in the industry as a whole, which further extends this issue beyond cover models. Stuart Hall's representation theory, here, acts as a critical lens through which to explore how Vogue represents Black women on its cover. Hall (1981) discusses the cultural struggle in representation and how power is deployed in the hegemonic cultural institutions, such as Vogue, to determine whose identities are desirable and sellable. His conceptualization of cultural struggle indicates the struggle over the meaning of representation, whereby visibility is both an indicator of progress and a sign that exclusion continues. By featuring only the most ridiculously successful Black women, Vogue is perpetuating a pattern of liminal inclusion, which is reinforcing the message that Black women are only welcome in high fashion when they are highly successful and meet White-dominated standards of commerce and beauty (Alexander-Floyd, 2021). While putting Black women on the cover of Vogue may act as evidence of diversity, the selection of women like Beyoncé, Michelle Obama, Halle Berry, and others poses an extremely conditional form of inclusion. Their presence, rather than auguring a long overdue revolution of fashion media, is a strategic appeasement of cultural and market pressures to make Vogue appear inclusive without dismantling its power structures.

CHAPTER 5

REFLECTIONS IN THE FRAME

The August 2020 issue of Vogue magazine featured Simone Biles on its cover during a time when the world was facing a pandemic and racial justice movements were gaining momentum. The Olympian, crowned as the best gymnast of all time, represented Black excellence, power, and ambition. The Vogue cover was received with harsh criticism among Black online communities. Users On Instagram abnd Twitter claimed that she had purposefully lightened her skin, altered her face, and styled her hair to minimize her natural features. The photograph incited discourse among many readers because of the way it appeared to devalue Biles' Blackness, rather than celebrate it. This moment of public scrutiny reveals the core inquiry of this chapter: for Black audiences, the cover of Vogue (or any form of representation) is never simply about absence or presence, but rather how that representation is being staged during any moment of presence.

To add, a few weeks earlier, in a leaked internal email, editor-in-chief Anna Wintour admitted that the magazine had failed to elevate Black voices and had tolerated "intolerant" behavior. Around the same time, former Vogue creative director André Leon Talley released his memoir The Chiffon Trenches, revealing decades of racism, tokenism, and marginalization within the very walls of the fashion institution he helped shape. The confluence of these moments so close to each other: Biles' cover, the confessional email, and the memoir's critique, exposed what many already knew: that Vogue's historical engagement with race had been performative, symbolic, and largely driven by marketable aesthetics to tap into more revenue. Therefore, the convergence of digital activism, social movements like #BlackLivesMatter, insider revelations, and

Black audiences' calling out of the magazine placed unprecedented pressure on Vogue. Inclusion could no longer be aesthetic; it had to be structural and accepted by Black audiences in order for it to be effective.

In this chapter, I move from discussing Vogue's editorial intentions to examining how recent covers have been received by Black audiences, and how these responses come to understand the magazine's gestures toward diversity. I argue that although Vogue's increased representation of Black celebrities and models was frequently hailed as progress, the reaction of the Black audience repeatedly showed that this was not always the case. This performative approach to diversity was disrupted by a coming together of multiple socio-political factors: the global impact of the Black Lives Matter movement, the rising influence of digital activism and social media challenges, as well as outspoken critiques from outside and within the fashion industry, such as André Leon Talley's memoir and Anna Wintour's own admissions of institutional failings. These developments forced Vogue into "damage control mode" creating a more urgent and visible confrontation with its racial exclusions, and therefore moving Black representation from the margins to a central position within its editorial practice. I examine how this "oppositional gaze" praised moments of genuine representation while criticizing others of tokenism and surface-level representation. Through a look at public commentary, social media discourse, and critiques from Black audiences and figures, this chapter argues that online responses by Black communities have served as a potent tool for accountability, compelling Vogue to address (at least more than before) issues of authorship, power, and true inclusivity rather than just surface representation. This chapter also showcases that when Black creators are given control, in any capacity, of the creative process of covers featuring Black women, the reception of these covers by

Black audiences resonates more than when White creators are in control of these images, highlighting the importance of including Black creators in such processes.

In this chapter, I continue to explore the shifting representation of Black women in Vogue US, this time, focusing on the late 2010s and 2020s.. This chapter provides a close analysis of selected covers and related editorial content, accounting for visual aesthetics like style and lighting, as well as assessing any racialized narratives that these representations produce. I also analyze the controversies that have arisen in discussion of these covers and the response of Black audiences, influencers', and creatives' responses, to gain better insight into the reaction to the racialized power relations and editorial politics of Vogue. Using bell hooks' theory of oppositional gaze. I explore how Black people, and especially Black women, engage and respond to these representations, how they maintain or disrupt dominant ideologies, and how Black individuals resist oppression through them. bell hooks' oppositional gaze theory provides an important foundation for this analysis because it works as it offers a model for understanding the visibility of Black women in fashion both as a site of resistance and surveillance. This provides the tools necessary to unpack Black audiences' reception of Vogue's efforts at diversity and how the inclusion of Black women remains a site of power struggle in terms of representing these women.

This chapter will start by situating Vogue within the Black Lives Matter movement, and how the emergence of influencer culture and the digital age brought forth increased calls for racial accountability in the fashion sector. The chapter will explore how Vogue was forced to contend with Black audiences on the matters of their representations, through a close reading of a few Vogue covers and public controversies, such as the 2020 September Hope covers, Beyoncé's 2018 cover, Simone

Biles's 2020 cover, and both Kamala Harris's 2021 covers. It also explores how social media campaigns, including the #VogueChallenge, moved in opposition to the traditional gatekeeping to open new doors for Black creators of fashion media. By mobilizing the above-presented media studies frameworks, this chapter shows that Vogue's response to these demands represents larger clashes on representation, race, and power in the digital era.

5.1 Black Lives Matter

George Floyd's murder in May 2020 sparked massive protests around the world and brought systemic racism, including in the fashion industry, into the spotlight (Vilaça, 2021). Following George Zimmerman's acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2013, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement gained unprecedented traction as millions of people called for racial justice (Oborne and Cooke, 2020). The fashion industry, therefore, had to respond to the outrage and had to confront its own history of exclusion and racial inequality. As this reckoning continued, industry-specific social movements for greater racial equality within global fashion began to emerge, for instance Black Model Matters and Black-Owned Fashion Matters (Vilaça, 2021). The effect of these movements could be seen in the increased diversity on runways. A testament to the social movement affecting the industry's hiring practices, the percent of models of color in New York Fashion Week increased from 36.9% in 2018 to 47% in 2020.(McDowell, 2019). There were also executive changes and more placements of Black people into higher positions, such as Virgil Abloh as Artistic Director of Menswear at Louis Vuitton and Edward Enninful as Editor-in-Chief at British Vogue,

which indicated a gradual, but still limited, increasing shift in power hierarchies in fashion media/luxury brands (Phelps, 2018; Evans, 2020).

Figure 5. Marshall (Left) & Casteel's (Right) Vogue U.S. Covers, 2020

Despite those changes, Vogue's engagement with the movement was received with skepticism. In the weeks that followed George Floyd's murder, Vogue remained largely silent about racial injustice happening. Instead, the magazine combined its June/July 2020 spread and dedicated it to an issue titled “A Common Thread,” a COVID-19 relief fund for American fashion workers, sidelining the urgent racial discourse of the moment. It was not until the September 2020 issue, the most significant and financially lucrative issue of the year for the magazine, that Vogue fully covered BLM and the issues of broader racial justice. The "Hope" issue, which was a collaborative effort, combined various international Vogue issues in an attempt to unite around a single theme of hope and change (Kazanjian, 2020). This kind of response

faced criticism, as racial justice in fashion has been appropriated as a means of commodification rather than creating real systemic change (Ahmed, 2012).

Vogue's September 2020 "Hope" issue included three covers representing different facets of present-day activism. A group of Black activists, including model Adwoa Aboah and English football player Marcus Rashford, who have both spoken out against systemic injustice, were featured on one cover as the "Faces of Hope." The second and third covers broke away from traditional celebrity portraits by keeping artists Kerry James Marshall and Jordan Casteel on board to create one-off painted artworks as covers. The fictional Black woman in Marshall's portrait is dressed in an Off-White dress, a high-end fashion label founded by Virgil Abloh, one of the few Black designers to head a major international fashion house. Off-White, a luxury Black-owned brand, then represents the Black-led redefinition of high fashion in an industry that has historically been dominated by Eurocentric aesthetics and exclusionary practices. Marshall's subject is shown standing calmly and a neutral gaze in his signature deep black skin tone, created by combining sienna, black, and blue tones. The piece exemplifies a form of visual resistance based on defiance and dignity.

Casteel’s subject, Aurora James, is rendered in a bright blue Pyer Moss dress that signaled elegance. Seated with quiet confidence and a direct, unflinching gaze, James (a Black woman entrepreneur and activist) being the cover subject, was a publicly celebrated moment; her visibility on that page was read as recognition of a Black woman leading an industry-facing campaign (the 15% Pledge: a nonprofit initiative founded by James that challenges major retailers and corporations to commit at least 15% of their shelf space, sales revenue, and annual spend to Black-owned businesses). In this instance, James is more than a muse; she is the embodiment of the

mission of the 15% Pledge organization she established and supports. On Instagram and other platforms, a number of Black creatives expressed their gratitude for the partnership. Casteel's illustration presents James not merely as a beautiful figure but also as a symbol of economic justice and activism, thereby presenting a visual story of empowerment and purpose. The photo resists reductive readings, instead affirming Black womanhood through agency, resolve, and grace.

Many Black readers and writers welcomed that Vogue had commissioned Black artists to center Black figures, a visible break from the magazine's long history of privileging European beauty ideals. Robin Givhan, a prominent Black fashion editor, wrote for the Washington Post praising the cover: "The painting is captivating and it gives the mind—as well as the eye—much to consider. … The magic of Marshall's fictional woman is in how she expands the cultural conversation beyond personalities…" (Givhan, 2020). This acknowledgment underscores how Marshall's painted cover contributed more than celebrity; it invited cultural reflection. However, Givhan also adds that "the commission doesn't absolve the magazine of its many sins, from hiring practices to unconscious biases," revealing that this gesture, while a good step forward, is not enough, and is felt by Black women. Jordan Casteel (the artist who painted Aurora James) framed her cover as honoring James's activism and said the subject represented a hopeful, substantive form of Black leadership. Black-led outlets and writers emphasized that putting Black bodies and Black creators on such a high-profile, artist-made cover felt meaningful. British Vogue editor Edward Enninful described the issue as a natural response to the moment: The covers were "a rallying cry for the future" and that working with an all-Black team "brought an authenticity… a feeling of togetherness." (BBC, 2020).

While the artistic and thematic choices of the “Hope” issue positioned Vogue as responsive to a cultural reckoning around race and was praised for it by some, its timing invites scrutiny. As Ahmed (2012) argues, diversity is often "staged," wherein performance of inclusion overshadows the transformative potential of inclusion: “the act of including certain bodies is more visible than the substance of inclusion itself.” While Vogue's choice to commemorate Black creators and activists was received by Black viewers as recognition, the delay in racial justice focus until the lucrative September issue, several months following the height of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in June, has one wondering if this move was symbolic of institutional change or a branding opportunity. These problems are further complicated by allegations of systemic racism in Vogue's workplace culture, which were revealed in André Leon Talley's memoir The Chiffon Trenches (2020).

5.2 The Chiffon Trenches

André Leon Talley, a pioneering African American fashion journalist, spent decades creating, establishing, and shaping magazines like Vogue and Vanity Fair. Although Talley contributed much to the industry, he experienced just as much systemic racism as a consequence of working in fashion, including for Vogue. In his memoir, The Chiffon Trenches (2020), Talley provides a candid account of these challenges, particularly highlighting his complex relationship with Vogue's Anna Wintour. Talley describes Wintour as "a colonial broad," and despite the misogynistic term, it suggests that she embodies an environment steeped in colonialism and White privilege. Talley went on to share, "She is entitled and I do not think she will ever let anything get in the

way of her white privilege." These remarks showcase the racial dynamics and disparities in power that Talley experienced with Wintour during his time at Vogue.

Over the course of his career, Talley often found himself as the only Black individual in predominantly white spaces. Looking back on his early days at Vogue, he remarked, "At one point, I was the only black person on Anna's staff." Despite his dedication and influence, Talley felt marginalized, revealing that he was sidelined for being, according to Wintour "too old, too overweight, too uncool". His experiences reflect many bigger systemic issues in fashion. He recounted instances where he faced overt racism, such as being inexplicably removed from his role as a commentator at the Met Gala and receiving inadequate compensation for his contributions to Vogue's then-new podcast. These instances reflect the industry's engrained racial biases and the challenges Black professionals encounter regularly.

In response to Talley's critiques and following his passing in 2022, Wintour revealed there were complexities in their relationship. She remarked, "Yet it's the loss of André as my colleague and friend that I think of now; it's immeasurable. He was magnificent and erudite and wickedly funny, mercurial, too". While her tribute recognized Talley's brilliance, it also shed light on the nuanced and, at times, strained nature of their association. Talley's revelations and experiences serve as a lens through which to examine Vogue's approach to race and representation from a prominent insider who is Black. His narrative challenges the magazine's purported commitment to diversity, suggesting that systemic racism and exclusionary practices were deeply entrenched and that a slight change in the covers was not enough. By discussing these issues, Talley not only critiques Wintour's leadership but also calls for a broader and more thorough inclusion within the fashion industry regarding race and representation.

5.3 The Email

After André Leon Talley revealed his accounts of Vogue's exclusionary enviornment and the ongoing backlash it faced for its absence of Black bodies on its covers and in its offices, Anna Wintour's response to racial inequities merely solidified the idea that her leadership was based in privilege and performative allyship. In June 2020, during the Black Lives Matter movement, Wintour sent an internal email to Vogue staff (which later leaked to the press), admitting the magazine had not done enough to elevate Black voices:

> "I want to say plainly that I know Vogue has not found enough ways to elevate and give space to black editors, writers, photographers, designers, and other creators. We have made mistakes too, publishing images or stories that have been hurtful or intolerant. I take full responsibility for those mistakes."

Black staff who worked with Ms. Wintour said they saw her apology "as hypocritical, part of a calculated play by an executive known for her ability to gauge the public mood." It was taken "as a token gesture meant to appease without actually showing any penance or apologetic lessons learned." (in New York Times, 2020) The culmination of these events, after decades of exclusionary practices, was met with skepticism, and an online trend started where Vogue employees recounted incidents of racist discrimination.

Wintour's privileged background may help explain her long-standing blind spot to racial inclusion. Wintour received, in many respects, the benefit of nepotism early in her career, as her father, Charles Wintour, was an influential newspaper editor who helped pave a way for her early journalism career (Best, 2017). Not to diminish

Wintour's skills, capability or talents, but unlike Talley, who had to fight through racism and exclusion to gain his place in fashion, Wintour rose through the ranks, eventually seizing control of Vogue and shaping it into an extension of her own narrow vision, one dominated by Eurocentric beauty standards, elite social circles, and commercial aspirations over meaningful inclusivity.

Historically, Vogue has also functioned as a gatekeeper, replicating rigid hierarchies of power and taste.. McRobbie (1998) traces a lineage of Vogue's editors, most of whom were "unashamedly elitist" in their vision of a luxury publication that catered to an exclusive readership (p. 173). Wintour upheld this tradition but also redefined what it meant to be a fashion editor. It was not only a matter of curating trends; Wintour was a significant shaper of the fashion design industry. By lending her support to designers like John Galliano in the early 1990s, Wintour rose above the role of editor. She now had ownership of fashion, deciding careers and moving the marketplace with just a handful of looks (McRobbie, 1998). However, her ability to anoint young (often White) designers contrasted sharply with her failure to use the same power to uplift Black talent.

At Condé Nast and Vogue, Black employees have both noted a culture of performative diversity, with one former employee saying that Black voices were consistently pushed aside in important editorial matters (Lampen, 2020).Popular feminism's reliance on visibility can result in spectacle over substance, where the act of being seen is valued more than systemic change. (Baner-Weiser, 2018) A statement, for example, came from Shelby Ivey Christie, who was recruited as a media planner at Vogue in 2016. Following the email leak, she tweeted that her time at the magazine was "the most challenging and miserable" of her career, adding that insensitive comments

from white colleagues was persistent: “A white male exec on the digital biz team dressed up in a chicken suit, with gold chains, sagging pants + rapped to our entire biz org as a meeting 'kickoff”. HR was alerted, but nothing was done. Christie writes of Black employees being overqualified, underpaid, and overworked. She recalls being assigned additional territories spanning from the West Coast to Italy, which stretched workdays to 20 hours.

Insiders' and staff of color's testimonies like these imply that Wintour's apology was disconnected from the realities faced by Black employees. Wintour acknowledged Vogue's shortcomings in an email, but her position remained unchallenged. In fact, rather than stepping aside following the scandal, she was promoted to an even more powerful role, becoming Condé Nast’s global editorial director and worldwide chief content officer, overseeing all Vogue publications in over 30 markets (Lampen, 2020). “There are very few people in the world who can have the influence on change and culture, as it relates to the activities that our business has, than Anna,” Condé Nast’s CEO, Roger Lynch, said regarding the promotion. This decision illustrated the shortcomings of performative allyship; Wintour acknowledged that the magazine had not done enough, but was still allowed full control of the magazine, thus continuing the same systems of privilege that kept Black talent out.

Alongside Wintour's continued leadership role, the company cut costs as financial strain ravaged across print media . The company has grappled with declining ad revenue, layoffs, and a shrinking print readership, with CEO Roger Lynch acknowledging that the pandemic caused existing financial pressure to become worse (Lee & Friedman, 2020). Fashion magazines, which have historically been financed through advertising by high-end brands, cut back their advertising budgets, forcing

Vogue and other magazines to move more into online spaces (Lee & Friedman, 2020). While While Condé Nast has attempted to modernize by embracing social media and paywalls, Wintour's editorial approach remains rooted in an outdated model of exclusivity that prizes celebrity appeal (e.g., on covers and the infamous Met Gal) over openness (Lee & Friedman, 2020), and while she has now stepped down as editor-in-chief at Vogue US, she remains Condé Nast's global editorial director and worldwide chief content officer.

Wintour's leadership typifies the contradictions of modern fashion media; she operates with immense power, controlling the industry's trends and supporting and promoting talent, yet she resists the systemic overhaul that is necessary for real inclusivity which is ironic given her start at Vogue was defined by breaking away from the norm and carving her own lane. As her 2020 apology may have identified Vogue's flaws, her continuing leadership and promotion within the Vogue institution speaks to the industry not truly being transformed. Instead of addressing the racial inequalities intrinsic in fashion media, Wintour and Condé Nast continue to uphold the exact same power structures that have kept Black voices excluded for so long. While media outlets like Vogue struggle to reconcile their exclusionary histories with current demands for equity, one of the benefits of this new cultural power lay outside of the institution and has had the potential to completely change the fabric of fashion media: social media influencers.

5.4 Influencers

The increasing presence of social media influencers has changed the dynamics of the fashion industry, especially the gatekeeping role once held by magazines like

Vogue. Influencers, whether bloggers, YouTubers, or TikTokers, offer a "targeted, near-instant connection with their audience, sharing their personal style and observations on fashion trends in an authentic, immediate way that traditional magazines did not" (Kim et al., 2021). As opposed to Hollywood celebrities, whose endorsements at times appear nuetral, influencers established trust with their followers, making their suggestions more persuasive (Izea, 2024). In fact, the very word "influencer" highlights their power to prescribe trends, giving them the role of tastemakers.

This shift of power saw Vogue embracing influencers as cover girls and models, with the rise of the "Insta-girls" like Kendall Jenner, Cara Delevigne, and Gigi and Bella Hadid coming in line with the fashion digital revolution (Zamboni, 2022). Unlike past supermodels who were discovered by top-tier agencies, they gained fame through social media and used their enormous online followings to secure high-fashion contracts. The i-D Magazine article, titled "How Has the Supermodel Evolved Since the 90s," considers what the Insta-girls mean for aspirations today (Zamboni, 2022). Their success represented a new path to stardom, whereby the position of social media took over the traditional line of fashion editors and modeling agencies (Rojek, 2007).

Vogue and other high-fashion institutions initially resisted this change. Yet, as the digitalization of fashion media grew and the decline of print became more than evident, luxury brands recognized the need for high-profile, social media-savvy models who would attract audiences once again to buy. To obey purely economic imperatives, fashion houses had to step outside their exclusive realm and embrace digital celebrities, whose visibility across social media was reshaping the fashion landscape (Church Gibson, 2012). This was immediately noticeable as many influencers began attending multiple fashion

week runways, a place previously reserved for celebrities and high-ranking fashion journalists.

Influencers have changed the relationship between celebrity and fashion. Although fame and celebrity were typically achieved through aristocracy or extraordinary talent, digital culture has allowed for a new relationship between fashion and social media influencers (Zamboni, 2022). As Audrezet et al. (2014) illustrate, there was a growing demand for authenticity with audiences, which required traditional celebrities to adopt identity traits of an influencer. The rise of social media even reshaped perceptions of celebrity worship (in Cashmore, 2006, p. 253), suggesting that this phenomenon was enabling influencers to take on a role traditionally filled by religious figures and providing their followers "powerful affirmations of belonging, recognition, and meaning."

This shift in power also uncovered and highlighted the industry's racism. As models were able to utilize social media to gain visibility and build personal brands, social media developed into a vehicle for activism (Zamboni, 2022). Black influencers and content creators began to call out the fashion industry for its lack of diversity, amplifying their voices and forcing Vogue and other institutions to acknowledge systemic racism. As Strick (2021) noted, social media gave models a voice, empowering them to speak openly about industry abuses. Organizations like the Model Alliance and Responsible Trust for Models magnified these discussions, breaking the industry's long-standing silence on racism.

The power of digital activism through fashion was most apparent with the emergence of the #VogueChallenge, which emerged in June 2020 against the backdrop of global Black Lives Matter protests. The Vogue Challenge originated from Salma Noor, a Black Muslim woman who encouraged others to make their own Vogue magazine

cover, signaling a lack of representation in mainstream fashion media. Noor explained, "Being a young Black Muslim woman, I don't see anyone like me in those magazines. I wanted to create a talking point around the lack of representation while speaking on social injustice" (in Akinfenwa, 2020). The challenge quickly gained traction, with Black and Brown creatives, models, photographers, and designers using it to showcase their talent. Whereas Vogue and other leading publications issued statements about more diversity, the challenge revealed the stark reality: during 127 years of Vogue's history, only 21 single Black models had been featured on its cover.

The #VogueChallenge and similar movements illustrate how social media has become both a space for exposure and a battleground for equity. Although Black models and influencers have gained more visibility, they are often included in the industry based on if they can fit Eurocentric standards and/or provide financial gain. The challenge also managed to demonstrate the power of digital activism. By bypassing traditional gatekeepers, Black creatives showed that they no longer needed Vogue to validate their worth. In addition to being a viral moment, the challenge served as a call for change, demonstrating that those who are systematically marginalized must take the initiative to obtain representation.

As fashion continues to shift digitally, influencers will continue to have a bigger role in fashion and activism. High fashion has shifted from being in an elite world of exclusivity to an engaged space, where individuals can hold those in the fashion elite accountable for their behaviors. The #VogueChallenge signified a turning point, as it established that the future of fashion will be shaped not just by editors and designers but by the collective power of digital activism.

5.5 A Shift In Perspective

Given the power that fashion media wields in shaping public opinion and its long history of exclusion of Black people, appearing on the cover of a magazine like Vogue, ELLE, or Harper's Bazaar is more than a professional accomplishment for Black artists, models, or public figures; it is a highly charged political act (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Yet, as cultural critics have long argued, visibility does not equal empowerment. As bell hooks (1992) states, “the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination...opens up the possibility of agency" (p. 116). Therefore, empowerment does not merely lie in being seen; rather, it lies in having agency over how you will be seen. The visibility of Black people on magazine covers, the styling, pose, expression, and narrative context, and even the behind-the-scenes creative control, all influence whether such images disrupt dominant racial norms or simply reimagine them in more palatable, tokenized forms.

White stylists, photographers, and editors have dominated Black representation for the majority of fashion history. It is under this imbalance of power that decades of racial prejudice in mass fashion imagery have witnessed Black subjects being erased or portrayed based on a Eurocentric gaze that fails to capture the nuance of Black identity (Berry, 2020). In response to these systemic issues, engaging Black photographers in significant editorial shoots is an important step toward authentic representation. Black photographers not only bring technical skill but also a deep cultural awareness that allows them to depict Black subjects in ways that challenge the White gaze and its historically limited framework of Black beauty and identity (Campt, 2021; Brady 2023.

The Vogue covers of Kamala Harris (2021), Simone Biles (2020), and Beyoncé (2018) provide three examples of the significance of Black creative control. The

conversation these covers sparked about race, representation, and the biases still present in the fashion industry made them historic in addition to the strong Black women they featured. While Beyoncé's cover was widely praised for making history with a Black photographer behind the camera, Biles and Harris's cover demonstrated the ongoing struggle to frame Black women in positions of power. The backlash from the Vogue covers showed the disconnect between Black artistic intention and White audience reception (and vice versa), and this demonstrates the continued struggle of what authentic Black representation looks like in elite fashion spaces.

5.5.1 Beyoncé's Vogue Cover

Beyoncé's September 2018 Vogue cover was a significant moment in the history of fashion media, not only because she graced a September cover, but also because she had unprecedented creative input into how it was produced. Given Vogue's customary strict editorial control under Anna Wintour, Beyoncé was granted total creative control over the photo shoot and accompanying article, an unprecedented move (Brooke, 2018). Beyoncé took advantage of the moment to call for actual representation, hiring Tyler Mitchell as the first Black photographer to shoot an American Vogue cover in the magazine's 126-year history (Brooke, 2018)

Mitchell, a young photographer from Atlanta, had already gained some noteriety specifically with his work for Teen Vogue and Office Magazine, as well as campaigns for brands like Marc Jacobs and Converse (Brooke, 2018). His presence on this milestone cover highlighted just how much more diversity behind the camera is needed. Before, Vogue had relied on a small pool of White male photographers, namely Steven Meisel, Mario Testino, and Patrick Demarchelier, to shape its image, all three of whom

were let go after they were accused of sexual harassment (Street, 2018). These photographers were consistently booked for celebrity editorial photographs, reinforcing a monolithic look that failed to address the richness of Black beauty and identity.

Beyoncé addressed the problem of diversity in fashion photography directly in her interview, stating: “Until there is a mosaic of perspectives coming from different ethnicities behind the lens, we will continue to have a narrow approach and view of what the world actually looks like.” She continues, “When I first started, 21 years ago, I was told that it was hard for me to get onto covers of magazines because black people did not sell. Clearly, that has been proven to be a myth. Not only is an African American on the cover of the most important month for Vogue, this is the first ever Vogue cover shot by an African American photographer.” (in Vogue, 2018).

Her decision to have Tyler Mitchell shoot the first Black photographer in the history of Vogue's 126-year run was a crucial disruption of the industry's Eurocentric standards. Beyoncé (in Vogue, 2018) claims that “if people in powerful positions continue to hire and cast only people who look like them, sound like them, come from the same neighborhoods they grew up in, they will never have a greater understanding of experiences different from their own. They will hire the same models, curate the same art, cast the same actors over and over again, and we will all lose.” This is an example of what Collins (1990) argues is part of Black women’s persistent efforts to resist and redefine oppressive images such as the “mammy”, “jezebel”, and others through self-definition and the creation of alternative Black feminist aesthetics, rooted in African-derived ideas emphasizing diversity, functionality, and community. bell hooks (1992) emphasizes this importance of reclaiming agency in image-making, writing that “the power of the gaze has been reclaimed... Black folks have taken back

the right to look" (p. 116). Mitchell's appointment was more than just symbolic in this context; t provided a visual account built by a person who could authentically represent Black beauty without modifying it to fit the taste of White people.

The photos followed a similar aesthetic as Lemonade, Beyoncé's 2016 visual album, which married historic and contemporary references to Black life, resistance, and heritage. Beyoncé was photographed in minimal makeup and a huge, gorgeous bouquet of flowers that doubled as the artist's natural crown. In a visual reinterpretation that challenged the strict binaries typically applied to Black femininity, Mitchell's cover and images leaned toward softness, intimacy, and regality, highlighting Beyoncé as both strong and vulnerable. Rather than constructed through the White gaze, therefore, these images were produced within the cultural frameworks they depicted, a powerful illustration of what hooks (1992) describes as the creation of "spaces of resistance" through visual culture (p. 128).

Figure 6. Beyonce 2018 September Vogue Cover

Mitchell's cover of Beyoncé challenged the conventions of high fashion photography. The image was intentionally imperfect, grainy, ethereally lit, and imbued with a sense of intimacy rather than the hyper-glossy, tightly styled fashion photography

that had long ruled Vogue,, or the glammed-up superstar the audience is accustomed to seeing Beyoncé as. A crucial point was emphasized by this stylistic decision: representation involves more than just who is shown in the picture; it also involves how they are perceived. Tyler Mitchell's use of lighting and composition was a prime example of what he has called the "honest gaze". It is a photographic approach that highlights the subject's humanity rather than treating them like a aesthetic commodity. His images offered an alternative: a vision of Black representation rooted in dignity, intimacy, and authenticity.

5.5.2 Simone Biles' Vogue Cover

Simone Biles' July 2020 Vogue cover iss an example of the difference between institutional gestures of inclusivity and authentic representation. Intended to honor Biles' athletic figure, the cover shows her facing away from the camera in a red backless swimsuit over a yellow-gold background. Despite this, the cover was criticized by Black readers online, presenting the racial disconnect between intention and reception. Although her appearance on the cover during a time of racial reckoning might have represented a significant commitment, the way the cover was produced and received instead exposed the ongoing racial blindness that still permeates through Vogue. The criticism that erupted from Black audiences and critics did not question Biles' status as an unparalleled athlete or a figure of Black excellence, but rather on the aesthetic and power dynamics that mediated her portrayal.

Figure 7.Simone Biles' August Cover, 2020

The choice of Annie Leibovitz, a white photographer, was equally symbolic and delicate. Given the success of Beyoncé's 2018 cover featuring Tyler Mitchell, it highlighted

fundamental disconnect between the act of showcasing a Black subject and the empowerment of Black creative voices. The problematic dynamics of the "white gaze," which hooks (1992) defines as the filtering of Blackness through a lens of white subjectivity and expectation, were evoked by entrusting the representation of a beloved Black figure to a White photographer, regardless of how prestigious the photographer may be. As the (mostly White) institution retained the creative control rather than the community being represented, the backlash argued that this power dynamic inevitably limited the possibility of an authentic representation. The argument thus expanded from a critique of the styling to a more extensive discussion of structural injustice behind the camera. The demand from audiences was not merely for Black faces on the cover, but for Black creative agency: for photographers, stylists, makeup artists, and art directors, and more, who could visualize Black subjects without the subconscious (or possibly conscious) filters of racial bias.

In the heightened political and social climate of 2020, such aesthetic smoothing was read as a failure to celebrate Blackness on its own terms, instead presenting a sanitized, unappealing version that aligned with hegemonic norms. Critics accused the magazine of using harsh, flat lighting and aggressive post-production editing (e.g., over-exposure, incorrect color grading) that resulted in an ashen, washed-out, and unnatural appearance. Across Twitter, Instagram, and fashion forums, the most immediate and widespread criticism from Black individuals was that the cover photo had been heavily lighted, drastically altering Simone Biles's natural skin tone. This reception directly

illustrates bell hooks's concept of the "oppositional gaze," as Black audiences actively interrogated the image, refusing to consume it passively and instead naming the ways it perpetuated a long history of devaluing authentic Black aesthetics. hooks (1992) shares that “by courageously looking, [Black women] defiantly declared: ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.” (p. 116)

Commenters compared the cover image to other cover photos of Biles’ from different publications and from her social media around the same time, noting a significant loss of the rich, warm undertones of her complexion. Britni Danielle (2020), a well-known Black journalist, took to Twitter to comment on the photoshoot: “Simone Biles deserved better than Annie Leibovitz’s bad lighting” Another comment on Twitter came from Black influencer, Alex Shed (2020), saying, “This Simone Biles shoot drives me crazy – She’s so beautiful and Annie Leibovitz can’t get an INCH of that skin to glow. Why can none of these pRofEsSioNaLs light black skin??????” By critiquing these covers, and not simply accepting and celebrating the fact that they are being represented, Black women exercised their agency and refused to passively accept unappealing portrayals (hooks, 1992). The notion that Black women are capable of "looking" with an oppositional intent, rather than internalizing these images, showcases how that vocal critique about Vogue covers is a way of asserting control over one’s own representation and actively challenges mainstream narratives (hooks, 1992). Whether it was a conscious or unconscious act of White aesthetic assimilation, it required Biles's Blackness to fit into a more limited, palatable, Eurocentric palette. The public outcry from Black audiences after the cover was released is a prime example of the oppositional gaze in action. According to hooks (1992), "the oppositional gaze is a way of looking that is critical, that is resistant, that is active."Articles from The Guardian,

HuffPost, and The Root all highlighted this specific issue, quoting social media users who expressed disappointment that her beautiful dark skin was not celebrated but instead erased.

The controversy surrounding the cover demonstrates the persistence of racial bias in visual culture, despite photographic technologies advancing. Dyer (1997) contends that film and photographic technologies were historically developed with White skin as the benchmark, starting with chemical film stock calibrated to register the tonal gradations of pale complexions and continuing with lighting techniques and "Shirley cards" that positioned whiteness as the normative exposure. While contemporary digital photography has resolved these technical limitations and proved that these “technological imperatives” were incorrect (Dyer, 1997), the Vogue cover reveals how the cultural assumptions embedded in these technologies endure. The lack of warmth and brightness in the depiction of Biles' skin replicated the historical issue of Black bodies being visually devalued in frameworks intended for whiteness. This failure extends beyond photography into practices such as hair styling and makeup, which are usually executed through a predominantly white gaze due to the hiring of only White staff, often leads to neglect the textures and tonalities of Blackness. Thus, Biles’ cover exemplifies not merely an individual aesthetic oversight, but the structural persistence of what is identified as the technological and cultural privileging of whiteness (Dyer, 1997).

5.5.3 Kamala Harris’s Vogue Cover

A few months later, in January 2021, Vogue released its February cover featuring Kamala Harris, who had then just been elected US Vice President. She was

also shot by Tyler Mitchell. The print cover featured Harris in a casual black blazer, white t-shirt, black jeans, and Converse sneakers (which she wore while on the campaign trail), against a pink and green fabric backdrop, the colors of Alpha Kappa Alpha, the historically Black sorority that she pledged at Howard University (Okwodu, 2021). The editor who oversaw the shoot, Gabriella Karefa-Johnson, and the writer of the cover story, Alexis Okeowo, were also Black. The cover quickly became controversial.

Figure 8. Kamala Harris' Vogue U.S. Print (left) & Digital (right) covers, 2022

In reply to the backlash, Vogue released a second digital cover, with Harris wearing a sharp formal powder blue Michael Kors suit draped in golden background. Again, however, the final decision in terms of the editorial rested with the Vogue staff whose opinions mirror (or are largely dictated by) Wintour. This discrepancy in presentation raises questions about how mainstream fashion media chooses to frame Black women in positions of power. Several news outlets, such as the CNN and

Associated Press reported that Harris's team was "blindsided" by the action taken by Vogue and had no knowledge that the magazine had replaced the cover photo from what the team had initially approved. Vogue's

intentions to release both images, according to a public relations statement, were to "respond to the seriousness of this moment in history, and the role [Harris] has to play leading our country forward." (Vogue, 2021) .

Even though the print cover had a lot of significance, especially for Black audiences who recognized the cultural and historical references in the images, a large portion of the criticism seemed to originate from White audiences who were unaware of the symbolic significance of the informal styling (Okwodu, 2021). For example, André Leon Talley took to Instagram to praise the cover, saying, "IT'S GREAT. JUST GREAT. GREAT. Her work uniform with her ubiquitous Converse sneakers is aspirational." The Washington Post's Robin Givhan (2020) even described it as "an audacious way of depicting this new political era and its break with the past." This showcases how Black women's voices, even in celebration, serve as a form of asserting identity and resisting invisibility and misrepresentation in media (hooks, 1992). The decision to use the more formal image for the digital cover suggests that Vogue was compelled to appease its predominantly White readership, who expected more from their vice president, as one Twitter user put it, "We didn't need to see a diminished, approachable Harris wearing her Chuck Taylors", illustrating the ongoing tension between authentic Black representation and White consumer expectations.

When Black individuals control their own representations, they can reject the white gaze's limitations and instead highlight subjects in a way that aligns with their lived realities and cultural nuances. In an email, Tyler Mitchell justified the original

photo cover by saying, “I grew up from a young age deeply understanding the rich history of these sororities and their significance. With this cover shoot with Madam Vice President-elect Harris, I wanted the set design to pay homage to that history, her status as an AKA, and Black sororities and sisterhoods worldwide.” (in Vogue, 2021) As Huegerich (2019) argues, when depictions of Black subjects are put into the world, the perspective they speak to is crucial. Black subjectivities will continue to be filtered through White expectations and stereotypes as long as the fahsion media sphere is dominated by White people. The mere existence of a Black body in the media does not necessarily equate to true inclusion. The mere presence of a Black body in the media does not necessarily translate into true inclusion. Instead of just producing images that White audiences are accustomed to seeing, Black photographers like Mitchell have the ability to produce representations that feel authentic to the Black experience. By controlling who takes the images and how Black figures are portrayed, the fashion industry can either reinforce existing racial hierarchies or help dismantle them. When Black people control the image, they also take a more active role in shaping narratives about Black culture and history. This change not only increases visibility but also pushes for a more fair and genuine form of representation by challenging the underlying power structures in the media and fashion industries.

Although Mitchell's contributions cannot be overstated, it is worth noting that he is the only Black photographer to have shot a Vogue US cover. His shoots with Beyoncé and Harris showcase the need to have more Black photographers present on the lens as it is equally significant to highlight the need for different Black perspectives. While Beyoncé, Biles, and Kamala Harris' covers were milestones, they were also a reflection of the tensions caused when Black creatives attempt to change industry

norms. The controversy over these covers is a reminder of the ongoing struggle for authentic representation amidst backlash from white audiences. They also demonstrate how putting Black creators and photographers behind the camera opens up new opportunities for Black representation that go beyond tokenism and look toward a future in which Blackness is heard, seen, and celebrated.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to chronologically track the appearance and disappearance of Black female models on the cover of American Vogue, with a focus on certain events, controversies, and cultural shifts that have had an impact on this trajectory. By examining three defining eras in Vogue's history, starting with Beverly Johnson's historic 1974 cover, to the celebrity-era under Anna Wintour, to the recent racial reckoning during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, and Black people's response to some of the recent covers, I have shown that Black representation in Vogue has never been coincidental. In fact, it has always been influenced by broader cultural, social, political, and economic forces.

Beverly Johnson became the first Black woman to be featured on the cover in 1974, which was as much a big moment in fashion history as it was a larger cultural transition following the Civil Rights Movement and the economic realities of shifting editorial times. Black women were featured more regularly in later decades, particularly during Wintour's tenure, but this was more selective, with only very popular Black celebrities who had commercial appeal being acceptable enough for a cover. Representation became more of a response to consumer demands, online competition, and Black celebrities' growing influence in popular culture than actual progress.

By the late 2010s, that strategy wasn't enough. Under pressure from social media movements like the #VogueChallenge and rising criticism of its history of exclusivity, Vogue had to face its past. Here, representation started to move beyond Black celebrity tokenism. Figures like Beyoncé and Kamala Harris used their covers to take creative

control, challenging the Eurocentric ideals of beauty promoted by Vogue and redefining who should be allowed to embody power and beauty. However, as shown with Simone Biles, Vogue has far more work to do in improving representation behind the scenes in an effort to attain a more accurate representation in front of the camera.

My research indicates that although the cover girls of Vogue have changed over the years, the shift has been almost exclusively driven by capitalist interests rather than a genuine desire for inclusivity. Authentic representation, as I have come to understand it, cannot be fully done within the limitations of organizations that put profit ahead of equity. It has to originate internally, as Black creators and other historically marginalized groups must self-author their images and stories. Only then does visibility move beyond the symbolic and toward something transformative.

This matters because it changes how we think about representation in media. Instead of asking who gets to be seen, we should ask, Who is deciding what they look like? Who benefits from that image? And what larger forces are shaping those choices? My study contributes to a growing body of work that aims to analyze and discuss the politics of visibility and promote a better understanding of how media power operates.

This research is not without limitations. I was not able to extend my research to other fashion magazines so that I could determine if Vogue's trajectory is representative of industry trends as a whole. I was also not able to include interviews with Black creatives, photographers, or models, whose insights would have provided more depth to this study.

Future research needs to move towards a more comparative examination of Vogue's international editions and other major magazines. Ultimately, this project has

allowed me to better understand the interrelationship between media, capitalism, and representation. It has shown me that visibility, while important, is not enough.

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