

Controlling Images of African women: The Hottentot Venus, Alek Wek & the Thought of Stuart Hall

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The Emergence of Controlling Images

In her essay, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images,” Patricia Hill Collins (1999) presents several stereotypical personas of the African American woman. She writes, “Portraying African American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarch, welfare recipients, and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women’s oppression” (p. 142). At the root of these controlling images is the African American woman’s sexuality, whether she is depicted as asexual or hypersexual. Collins illustrates this dichotomy in her description of Matriarchs as “overly aggressive, unfeminine women [who]...emasculate their lovers and husbands” (p. 145) and the Jezebel, the “whore, or sexually aggressive woman” (p.147). Additionally, class plays a significant role by intersecting with race in order to shape images of Black women. Collins, for instance, evokes economic exploitation in her descriptions of Mammies and Welfare Mothers. In the final section of her essay, Collins further complicates our understanding of these controlling images by discussing the way Black women fall into the category of the ‘Other’ in terms of Western standards of beauty.

This brief reference to Patricia Hill Collins is the launching point from which this paper begins. I intend to expand Collins’ idea of controlling images to include African women. African women have much in common with African American women in terms of a history of slavery and colonialism in a Western (i.e., White American/European) system. Additionally, Western standards of beauty encroach upon and devalue the visual image of African and African American women in similar ways. However, African women who live in Africa or are recent immigrants in Western countries face another set of controlling images based on their immediate association with the “Dark Continent.” In fact, one could argue that these images are at the root of what Collins asserts about controlling images that oppress Black women.

This paper presents one particular controlling image: the Western vision of African women, or the Hottentot Venus, a South African woman brought to Europe in the early nineteenth century who was exploited in a traveling exhibition

of her 'exotic' body. After a brief review of the historical emergence of the Hottentot Venus, I pose the question of whether or not her image remains in Western media and examine this issue through an analysis of images of Alek Wek. As a Sudanese refugee and international supermodel, the image of Wek serves as an appropriate subject to analyze the intersection of postcolonial, feminist and popular culture. As an interpretive and theoretical framework for analysis, Stuart Hall's work on the encoding and decoding of images and his discourse on postcolonial and cultural theory are used here to interpret the structural and cultural implications of Wek's photographs. Essentially, Hall's work will be used to address the central question posed in this paper: Do images of Alek Wek in the media negate or support the image of the Hottentot Venus?

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Thought

This discussion on the image of African women in Western media is well served by an epistemological framework of postcolonial theory. As Steeves (2008) notes, "As Africa's 54 countries are products of Western conquest, followed by colonial rule and neocolonial interventions, a postcolonial framework is appropriate for studying Africa's representation in Western media" (p. 418). Additionally, the goal of postcolonial studies is to examine "the problematics of colonization and decolonization" within an "emancipatory political stance" (Shome & Hedge, 2002, p. 250 quoted in Steeves).

A postcolonial framework is important to this discussion of African women because it allows us to explore how the image of African women has evolved (or remained stagnant) as a result of colonization and decolonization. This paper could focus on Wek's psyche as an African woman submersed in Western popular culture and her personal journey from the Third World to England. However, Mills (2003) warns scholars of colonial discourse of relying too much on psychoanalytical concepts that emphasize stereotypes and fantasies. Although the roles of stereotypes and fantasies are crucial to an understanding of colonial and postcolonial culture, the

Reliance on psychoanalysis for the analysis of colonialism is that the specificity of the colonial context is lost – the materiality of invasion, discrimination, murder, rape, expropriation of land and also resistance are erased...In focusing attention on the colonial psyche, we risk ignoring the political and economic base on which those psyches were constructed." (Mills, 2003, p. 693)

Therefore, this paper presents a visual analysis of Wek's fashion photographs within a broad context, taking into account her position within a

particular political, economic and cultural framework. This relationship between Wek and the Hottentot Venus is grounded in the way images of African women interact with other cultural constructs (Wallace, 2004). Postcolonial studies and the work of Stuart Hall offer a theoretical framework in which to position these cultural constructs and position the African woman within the broader context of the black diaspora. Hall asserts that “the black subject cannot be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity” (1996a, p. 444). Wek’s emergence as a fashion icon represents a major shift in popular culture that results from sensibilities of the postcolonial era. And, it is this postcolonial era that involves the “impact of civil rights and black struggles on the decolonization of the minds of the peoples of the black diaspora” (Hall, 1996b, p. 466). Brah (2007) further notes that Hall’s work is specifically attuned to the voices of the subaltern and the experience of ‘migrancy.’ Therefore, it is appropriate that one look at Wek’s photographic images produced by the Western fashion industry as the embodiment of blackness, the immigrant experience, sexuality, civil rights and popular culture in a postcolonial era.

The Hottentot Venus: Past and Present

There is an unexpected sun today
in London, and the clouds that
most days sift into this cage
where I am working have dispersed.
I am a black cutout against
a captive blue sky, pivoting
nude so the paying audience
can view my naked buttocks.
(from *The Hottentot Venus*, Alexander, 2002)

The introduction of the Hottentot Venus to the West represents a historical shift that eventually led to controlling hypersexual images of black women. In 1810, Saartje Baartman, was taken from her home in southern Africa to London and given the stage name Hottentot Venus. ‘Hottentot’ is a derogatory term for one of African descent while ‘Venus’ represents female desirability. Later, Baartman was purchased by an animal keeper in Paris and was paraded as a traveling exhibit throughout France while her body, her enlarged buttocks in particular, because the subject of artists and medical illustrators. When she died in 1815, Baartman’s body was dissected by French naturalist, George Cuvier who wrote a report detailing the

one aspect of her body that she was able to hide from an audience, her elongated labia (Hudson, 2008).

This image of Hottentot Venus - her exotic dark skin, large buttocks and abnormal genitalia - serves as the foundation for the Western fantasy of African women. She does not meet traditional Western standards of beauty – instead, she evokes fascination and a curiosity for the exotic and unknown. Oyewumi (2008) builds upon this claim when she asserts that, “The bottom line (pun intended) is that whatever the realities of Africa and African bodies, they are liable to be exhibited to soothe the Western mind/body of its sexual predilections *du jour*” (p. 161). Furthermore, this image serves as the foundation of the hypersexualized images of the Jezebel, Breeder Woman and Welfare Mother that Collins identifies that exist in anti- and post-bellum United States.

In addition to the exploitation of her sexuality, the image of the Hottentot Venus is primitive, as if African women are lagging behind in the evolutionary process. Cuvier wrote of Saartje Baartman, “When she was alive, her movements were brusque and capricious like those of a monkey...I have never seen a human head more resembling a monkey’s than hers” (Cohen, 1980, p. 239). Hickey and Wilie (1993) note that “most Americans only need to hear the word Africa and they instantly imagine a place dark and primitive, ‘tribes’ living in jungles – and often at each other’s throats – wild beasts dominating the landscape” (p. 1). Oyewumi further notes that African women were exhibited in European zoos and museums as part of their exotic collections up until the 1920’s.

In recent decades, there are still representations of this hypersexualized, animalistic image of the African woman in Western media. The 1989 film “Coming to America” starring Eddie Murphy features several supporting characters that embody this image. In his analysis of “Coming to America,” Rahier (2001) makes a brief, but significant observation about the depiction of African women in the movie. Besides three leading characters,

All the women, particularly African women, are fundamentally in a position of submission. They are portrayed as closer to traditions than men, and therefore less independent, less modern than men are...In the same order of things, the only bodies that the viewers see naked or half naked...are the bodies of African women servants. (p. 269)

In his discussion of symbolic racism in advertising, Cortese (2008) builds upon this notion of the animalistic African woman with an overt sexual nature. He writes, “the image of the sexual predator continues in contemporary advertising. Black women are sometimes portrayed as predatory, primitive, wild, or animal-like” (p. 104). As a supplement to this discussion, Cortese includes two advertising images

featuring Black women. In one ad for a hair product, an illustrated woman is hugging a roaring tiger and her hair is styled to resemble the tiger's fur. The caption reads, "Unleash your natural beauty." The other ad, for what appears to be a perfume called 'Animale,' a black woman is kneeling on all fours with tiger stripes drawn on her nude body and her hair is styled so that it resembles a mane.

Lutz and Collins' (1993) analysis of *National Geographic Magazine* demonstrate the notion that African women in the media are often seen naked or bare breasted, which alludes to an uncivilized nature in the Western value system. Lutz and Collins examine the ideological purpose of portraying African women in such a way. "The magazine's gaze at the Third World operates to represent it to an American audience in ways which can but do not always shore up a Western cultural identity or sense of self as modern and civilized" (p. 366).

Even in the most subtle ways, these notions of modernity and civilization, or lack thereof, are apparent in media representations of African culture. Take, for instance, a layout in the March 2009 issue of *Arise* magazine, Africa's self proclaimed "global, style & culture magazine" produced by a Nigerian publisher and distributed throughout the U.S., Europe and Africa. Although the magazine primarily features designers, artists, actors and musicians of African descent, there is a two-page spread featuring runway fashions of European and American designers. The caption reads, "The spring/summer 09 catwalks were awash with accents of Africa. Alexander McQueen's showed featured kaleidoscopic prints referencing savannah wildlife and landscapes. Bernhard Willhelm's models prowled down the catwalk in face paint and masks" (p. 34). Indeed, many of the models shown are garbed in animal prints, one is shown with a hat made of grass and another is donning a grass skirt. These photos are not too distant from that image Cortese paints in his discussion of racism in advertising described above.

Alek Wek: The Modern Hottentot Venus?

Several theorists (Hobson, 2005; Hudson, 2008; Wallace, 2004) agree that the image of the Hottentot Venus is central to the visual and cultural construction of the African woman in the West. The overarching question posed here is: "Has the media made any progress in moving away from stereotypical controlling images, or is it upholding them with a steady amount of fervor?" This study presents an examination of a key African figure in the fashion industry, which is notorious for idealizing Western standards of beauty, to gauge the role of the Hottentot Venus. In an industry dominated by Caucasian models with a European aesthetic appeal, the image of Wek, with her dark skin and distinctly African features, stands out. Even in her autobiography, Wek (2007) describes the way she was teased as an adolescent in London for being different and "primitive." She writes,

The children at school in London had made fun of me for having such long legs, for having such dark skin, for having a round, African face and short, reddish hair. Everything. It was therefore quite a surprise to become a fashion model. (p. 134)

There has been much debate about Wek's attractiveness and worthiness as a model and she certainly represents a difference, or otherness, in the fashion industry (Hobson, 2005). As illustrated in the example of the *Arise* article, visual representations of Africa in the fashion industry are depicted as exotic and animal-like. The goal of this paper is to examine whether or not these images support the negative, stereotypical image of the Hottentot Venus, or they are a sign of progress signaling the opening of doors in an industry that is historically biased to a particular aesthetic. In other words, does Wek's image in the mass media negate or support the image of the Hottentot Venus? Has she normalized an African beauty aesthetic, or has she become a spectacle reminiscent of the Hottentot Venus' fame?

Analysis of Wek's photographic images

This paper involves an analysis of three magazine covers on which Wek appears: the April 2009 issue of *Vogue Canada*, the September 2007 issue of *Ebony* and the January 2003 issue of *British Vogue* (see Figures 1, 2, and 3). To identify the relevant aspects of these images, four central questions were kept in mind while looking at the photographs:

1. How does Wek look in contrast to more conventional looking models?
2. Do models with similar features appear in the same photographs as Wek?
3. What types of clothes is she wearing?
4. In what types of publications do these photographs appear?

Encoding and Decoding the Image

During the process of creating images, the creators, owners, designers and tools involved in the production process play a role in embedding meaning into visual messages. Hall notes that there is a framework of meanings, knowledge, ideologies and assumptions that impact the process of production (2001, p. 167). To that end, in looking at the photographs of Wek, one must acknowledge the discursive aspects of producing the images, which includes among other things, the method and techniques of fashion photography, which are designed to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the subject. On a deeper level, this discursive aspect of encoding is based on how the culture of the fashion industry defines and classifies beauty.

While decoding images, viewers tend to apply dominant codes in order to assign meaning to a message; and these dominant codes represent the institutional, political and ideological structure present in their environment (Hall, 2001). Hall asserts that “it is this set of decoded meanings which ‘have an effect,’ influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences...the ‘message,’ via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices” (p. 168).

Hall further notes that it is through connotative codes that a dominant cultural order thrives and social order is embedded in a “pattern of preferred readings” (2001, p. 172). A connotative reading reveals that Wek disrupts this dominant cultural order on the covers of *British Vogue* (see Figure 1) and *Ebony* (see Figure 2) presented here. The absence of anyone else who looks like her is quite telling that she is not the norm and stands out as a dark spot on the page. This is also the case to a less obvious extent on the *Ebony* cover. Although all four models are women of color, they look much different than Wek – they have long hair, lighter skin and much less distinctive, stereotypical African facial features. Although they are all women of African descent, the models pictured next to Wek meet a much more traditional Western standard of beauty, and Wek is the model that disrupts this tradition.

Hall asserts that “Positively marked terms ‘signify’ because of their position in relation to what is absent...Meaning is relational within an ideological system of presences and absences” (1985, p. 109). And, when thinking about concepts such as “cultural hegemony” as Hall describes, the visible is, by design, dominant and more progressive than the invisible (Wallace, 2004, p. 266). And, Wek’s visibility in this photograph is essentially “a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility” (Hall, 1996b, p. 468). In a sense, Wek’s visibility on these magazine covers signifies the invisibility of other African women who look like Wek and are absent from the fashion world. On the cover of the issue of *British Vogue*, two out of eighteen models pictured are black, specifically Alek Wek and Naomi Campbell, and the rest appear to be Caucasian. The caption underneath the picture reads, “Fashion’s Force.” Based on the picture, Wek, as an obvious minority, is an exception to the rules of determining who the force behind fashion is.

In the case of the *British Vogue* cover, Englishness, an embodiment of British culture and values, is the dominant ideology structuring this image and portrays an ideological theme that represents the “immediate and political moral values” of the image while reinforcing the ideology’s universality (Hall, 1973, p. 187). In this example, ideology is represented through each model wearing the Union Jack, which is worn as a dress, skirt, shirt, jacket, and pants. In another way, ideology is represented by the ethnicity of the models on the magazine where it is implied that everyone on the cover represents Britain. Hall specifically refers

to the way the hegemonic concept of “Englishness” contradicts the ethnic diversity of the people who actually live in England (1996b, p. 447). It is possible that the lack of racial diversity and Wek’s apparent otherness in this photo reinforces this ideology of Englishness as Hall describes.

The Naturalized Code

If the fashion industry sets standards for what is beautiful and what is in style, then the images on covers of fashion magazines represent those standards. According to this logic, if Wek appears on the cover of a fashion magazine, it automatically means she is beautiful and accepted by fashion industry standards. This is an example of what Hall describes as a naturalized code, a place where the line between connotative and denotative meaning is blurry. Naturalized codes seem to produce literal, universal meanings and conceal the fact that there is a process of coding involved (Hall, 2001). If Western ideology operates under the assumption that the fashion industry produces only aesthetically pleasing images, there is no questioning the beauty of fashion models. So, in her status as a supermodel, Alec Wek is immersed in this dominant naturalized code, not separated from it and not “the other.”

Wek’s relation to this naturalized code signals a shift in what Hall refers to as the politics of representation. Wek’s image on the issue of *Vogue Canada* (see Figure 3) is a striking representation of this shift. She stands alone in the image with no other models to reinforce her “otherness.” Hall ideas support the progressive nature of this photo when he writes, “Cultural politics of difference is undergoing a transformation and marginality has become a space where racial and ethnic minorities have a voice” (Hall, 1996b, p. 467).

Furthermore, this shift in cultural politics involves the notion that the category ‘black’ is a politically and culturally constructed concept and there is an increasing recognition that there is broad diversity within the black diaspora (Hall, 1996a, p. 443). Although Wek seems to represent otherness in terms of Western standards of beauty on the *Ebony* cover, her appearance with the other black models also represents diversity within this ethnic group and dispels the notion that all black people are the same.

Conclusion

Hall’s assertion that signs contain “polysemic values” is relevant to the images of Alec Wek presented here. Hall defines polysemic value as the “ability to signify more than one thing, to carry a variety of potentially conflicting messages” (Procter, 2004, p. 66). As illustrated in the analysis above, Wek both embodies and rejects the image of the Hottentot Venus. While images of Wek maintain aspects of exoticness and otherness, she is not as displaced and

objectified in terms of her race as the Hottentot Venus. Moreover, her images have the ability to represent a progression in ethnic diversification of the Western fashion industry.

Wek appears in an industry interested in the intersection of sexuality and standards of beauty, while Hottentot Venus, represents the intersection of sexuality with animalism and the grotesque. Although Wek could be viewed as an exotic other, she is immersed within a discourse of beauty and an industry that places immense value on physical appearance (Hobson, 2005). Her sexuality in the Western world is not the same animalistic, primitive sexuality as the Hottentot Venus.' In fact, Wek's sexuality is exploited in the same way as the white models appearing in photographs with her. And, she is a willing and accepted participant in this industry and English culture. Essentially, the Hottentot Venus represents the standard of deviant sexuality in women (Wallace, 2004), while Wek appears in mainstream representations of sexuality.

From a cultural and postcolonial studies perspective, the reality is that there are numerous arguments to acknowledge or dispute Wek's relationship with the Hottentot Venus. On one hand, Wek's popularity in the fashion world is a testament to inclusiveness. On the other hand, her image could be an appropriation of the latest exotic fad. For example, Hobson (2005) draws on bell hook's notion of "the commodification of Otherness" when seeking an explanation of Wek's appeal.

Further research on the fashion industry's impact on culture would provide a theoretical framework for analyzing images of models and environments that do not meet typical Western aesthetic standards. The goal in such a study would incorporate the fashion industry's intersection with popular culture. Hall in particular would offer useful insight into structure of popular culture and the way it represents struggles between dominant and subordinate groups (Procter, 2004, p. 11). As Hall warns, "we must not be fooled by appearances" (2001, p. 170). In a study that seeks to identify the ideology of the fashion industry, it is essential to acknowledge the racial, ethnic, economic, sexual and gendered messages coded into visual products of the industry.

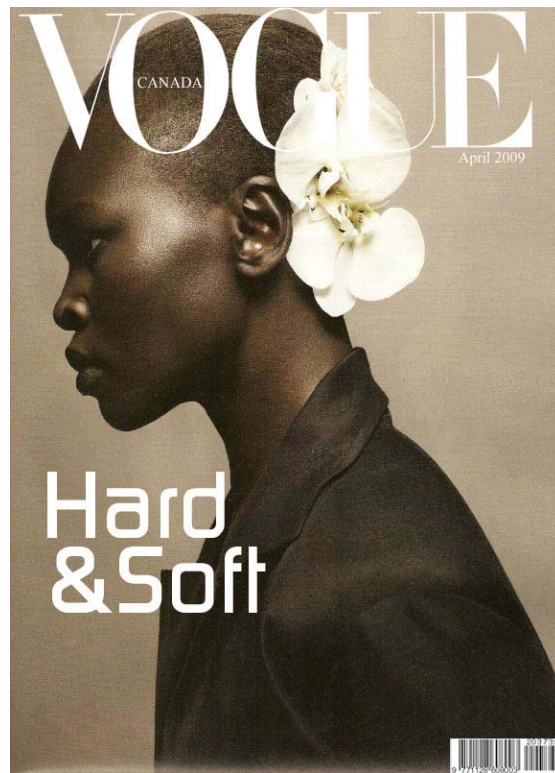
Figure 1. Cover of *British Vogue*, January 2003 Issue



Figure 2. Cover of *Ebony*, September 2007 Issue



Figure 3. Cover of *Vogue Canada*, April 2009 Issue



Photos retrieved from http://www.fashionmodeldirectory.com/models/Alek_Wek

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