The Invisible Black Body

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The fashion industry sets the tone for what is to be culturally tolerated both domestically and around the world. Efforts to increase black representation in fashion have focused almost exclusively on diversity in modeling. I argue for the rhetorical significance of black representation behind the camera, and in other positions not visible to the public eye, through an analysis of Vogue magazine's decision to hire a black artist to photograph Beyoncé for the September 2018 cover. Drawing from the conceptual arguments of both pop cultural commentators and rhetorical theory, three conclusions emerge: first, black artistic eyes are better suited to the depiction of black subjects; second, representation efforts focused exclusively in modeling indicate an ongoing prioritization of the black body over the black mind; third, a more richly integrated society would normalize the unconscious assumption that creatives and leaders working behind the scenes might be black. As the field seeks equality and inclusion, the invisible intellectual black figure—such as the black photographer—and its existence in the imagination are vital for both the immediate, tangible implications as well as the effects upon the unconscious but widely held conception of black Americans.

Introduction

For its September 2018 issue, *Vogue*, the most highly regarded magazine in fashion and, therefore, a leader in the contemporary fashion industry and the larger artistic community, hired a black photographer to shoot its cover for the first time (10). This monumental and well-discussed event merits rhetorical examination in order to both allow it the artistic respect it deserves and encourage the continuation of such progression. Scholars have recognized the importance of including black perspectives in public spaces and have analyzed depictions of black people in media. However, I expand recent scholarship by analyzing the rhetorical significance of black representation behind the camera, particularly for the fashion world, considering the public's conception of black people who are not represented visually. As we seek equality and inclusion, the existence of "invisible" black figures-- such as the black photographer-- in the imagination is vital. As the fashion industry pursues increased racial diversity, it must also consider the impact of non-visual representation on unconscious but widely held conceptions of black Americans.

Representation in Popular Culture

The issue of representation is one of the primary concerns of anti-racist Americans today. The popularity of movies featuring major heroic characters of color, such as *Black Panther* (5) and *Rogue One* (8), the outcry around whitewashed movies such as *Ghost in the Shell* (3) and *The Last Airbender* (9), the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, and other public discussions around race in media and entertainment have indicated a growing preoccupation with when and how people of color appear in popular art. This question becomes especially important in the fashion world.

Even though it is unapologetically appearance-driven, setting the tone for what is to be culturally tolerated both domestically and around the world, the fashion industry remains white-dominated (4). Though recent discussions in the magazine world create the sense that the fashion industry is diversifying, it remains a racist arena both historically and currently. Tyra Banks explained that her long feud with Naomi Campbell could be drawn to "an unwritten rule that only one of [the top models] could be black" (4). Although more models of color now can rise to prominence, reports from Fall 2018 reveal that 67.5% of models walking the runways were white (13). The fashion world is still visually white-dominated, though it is gradually working to increase inclusion among models.

When black models have made it onto the cover of leading fashion magazine *Vogue*, they have often been depicted in troubling ways. In 1966, the first black *Vogue* cover model graced its slick pages with "her hand strategically placed over her mouth and nose" (4). Nearly half a decade later in 2008, LeBron James was photographed looking "beastly and intense" next to an "ethereal"-looking Gisele Bundchen (4). Such images hardly craft a positive conception of black Americans in the audience's imagination. These covers were conceptualized by white photographers who had stereotypes guiding their lens, implicitly pushing them to perpetuate such explicitly racist images.

However, *Vogue* hired a black photographer to photograph Beyoncé Knowles for its September 2018 cover. That Tyler Mitchell was the first black cover photographer for such a powerful magazine reveals that the fashion world performs more poorly in terms of diversity behind the scenes than it does in front of our eyes. As *Dazed* magazine contributor Dominic Cadogan (2) recognizes, the Afro-aesthetic has already been well-established in the white-dominated industry, and therefore white photographers are already known for their depictions of it. In this and other cases surrounding black models and fashion, the need for photographers already seems filled. As he described the heightened difficulty he encountered in his attempt to get noticed as a black photographer, Ronan McKenzie suggests that "institutions need to actually begin hiring black photographers, instead of just using our images on the moodboard and then commissioning someone else" (2). At this point, the fashion world is open and willing to explore non-white cultures; however, it has yet to recognize a need for black photographers.

As the fashion industry works toward diversity and representation, it has tried to address the surface level issue by including more models of color. However, this is not always accomplished with cultural consciousness or respect, and fashion has not diversified as an entire industry. Its progress has amounted to little more than a public relations effort, and it has failed to address the whiteness that is not as publicly visible. Black photographers deserve to be a part of the movement for representation for both the depiction of other people of color and for their own existence in the artistic world.

Theoretical Connections

Rhetorical scholars have devoted much attention to visual depictions of black Americans and to the importance of including black perspectives. In the white-dominated and white-normative public sphere, white people control depictions of black subjects, though they have no conceptions of blackness on which to base these depictions except for other white-controlled ideas about black Americans. This creates a cycle of problematic, stereotyped representations of black Americans. The issue is twofold: white artists and writers can make black Americans into whatever they want, these resultant images represent how black people are implicitly viewed, and they impact how they will continue to be interpreted and discussed.

Mandziuk (7) terms these white treatments of the black subject "rhetorics of domination" (p. 467). When employing rhetoric of domination, white commentators and public discussion leaders such as artists and journalists maintain power by acknowledging the wisdom of black subjects while preventing too much disruption to their power through disciplining portrayals. This manifests in various forms, including simplistic and primitive character profiles. This allows white people to feel intellectually superior to seemingly funny and exotic black rhetors by, for example, portraying twisted and grotesque descriptions of body and speech, which both entertain and ease discomfort for white people as well as sibylline ideas, which evoke white fascination (7). In short, white people dominate black rhetors by degrading them to sources of entertainment. This serves to diminish messaging and slow down challenges—and, therefore, change. Through this rhetoric of entertaining domination, white audiences twist African American rhetoric into a kind of involuntary servitude.

This rhetoric of domination in white-controlled media can play out even more clearly in photos. In her examination of the media's treatment of photos of James Meredith as he was shot during his anti-racist March Against Fear, Thornton (14) recognized that in cases of ambiguity or uncertainty, white media creators can make the photo and the black body into whatever they need to substantiate their own ideas about black subjects. In these images, the media tends to portray him as either fearful or angry, which serve to satisfy two different narratives about black Americans. "Anger is tied to assumptions of willful action," Thornton clarifies, recalling the ways in which anger serves to remind readers that black people like Meredith may be powerful and dangerous. "Fear, by contrast, is intertwined with assumptions of passivity" (14, p. 470). Though the audience could clearly see the black subject of the image, white perspective controlled the portrayal of and media discourse around the black subject, so it fit him into narratives the audience could understand. Thus, the image itself served as a location of tension as media outlets eased white audiences' anxieties by invoking "black victimhood… ritually putting Meredith in his place" (14, p. 471), while also maintaining that he may have a degree of agency. The media controlling the image and its attendant discourse determined which white American conceptions of black Americans were affirmed in

the American imagination.

As Thornton well realized, the significance of visual rhetoric often lies not in the image itself, but in the context, making of, and ideas behind an image. Visual rhetoric is the analysis of material texts in which "meanings are made through exploration of the image in social, cultural, political, and economic contexts, as well as knowledge of how the image was made" (6, p. 60). In other words, considering the impact of an image requires examining all that surrounds the images as part of the image's meaning; the meaning of the image is in its effects, and images do not exist in a void.

In the area of visual rhetoric, the idea of image control is vital; when a person or group holds control over the creation or dissemination of images, the image's meaning changes. Gleason and Hansen (6) term image control *ideological management*, which "is possible through creating a make-believe reality" (p. 69). In their analysis of official White House photos from events such as meetings with delegations, lunches with powerful friends, and gatherings in the Oval Office, Gleason and Hansen (6) claim that the Obama administration's choice to exclude photojournalists amounts to "imposed ideology" (p. 69). By controlling who took which images, the administration secured control over its own representation and the perceived reality of the event. When those in powerful positions control images, or perceived realities, they can use them to reinforce the ideologies most likely to keep them in power.

Thus, it can be deduced that white control over images of black people is more likely to reinforce the power dynamics and ideologies of a racially oppressive society. Shifting control of the images and the subjects depicted allows for a different effect, which creates new kinds of meaning for black audiences rather than a generally presumed white audience. When depictions of black subjects are put into the world, the perspective to which they speak is important. For Nunley, "a rhetor identifies with an African American audience through performances linked to identifications" (11, p. 30). Only by making all aspects of depictions of African Americans speak to African American worldviews can a black audience truly identify with them. Nunley recognizes that the public sphere is "already racialized, gendered, and heteronormative" (11, p. 30). This means that the public sphere is unprepared for black worldviews or ideas. Only when black rhetors choose to deliberately free themselves from white

domination and speak truth to identify with black audiences do they prevent the public sphere from taking such control over conceptions of who they are. The mere presence of a black body signifies neither inclusion nor an end to racism. So long as the public sphere remains a white space, black subjectivities can remain dominated by white ideas about black people, often forcing black rhetors to simply assimilate to what white people are ready to consume.

Scholars agree that representation impacts how black people are understood in the American imagination. For the fashion industry, this would suggest that an increase in black models gracing covers, advertisements, and runways would be significant. However, the way that they are represented and more importantly, who is in control of their representation, remains insufficiently studied. From not only a rhetorical, but also a moral perspective, diversification of the industry and representation within it should not be limited to that which audiences can obviously observe, such as models. This may enable the industry to continue racist or discriminatory practices.

Rhetorical Analysis

An increase in black representation among fashion photographers and this exploration of its significance is rhetorically significant for its accomplishment of three major feats. First, since fashion draws upon black culture frequently (12), including a black artistic eye toward these trends will portray them more properly and respectfully, tamping down the power of the white public sphere to subjugate black Americans as a whole. Second, to focus too directly on models, rather than the entire industry, indicates an ongoing prioritization of the black body over the black mind in the imagination. Although extremely important, modeling cannot be the sole focus of representation initiatives; black artists in other areas deserve similarly increasing attention. Third, a more richly integrated society would normalize the assumption that even those creatives and leaders working behind the scenes might be black; a dignified blackness could be included in our assumptions about the invisible as well.

The black artistic eye is more rhetorically prepared to handle the increasing number of black subjects than the pedigreed white photographer. When well-meaning fashion executives conceive of increasing representation, they imagine it visually. If a black model is present, they feel they

have done their job. These representations are often problematic and commodified in practice since the white eye photographing them lacks the perspective to portray and thus fully respect the model's identity.

In the current model, black models exist only for the white perspective. According to black photographer Joshua Woods, "'A lot of magazines cater to a white audience that exist in middle America so the lens is different'" (2). By this *lens,* he describes the perspective the photographer brings to the image. When magazines use black cover models, they do so to ensure white audiences that they are "good" and consider "diversity." They do not exist to serve the black model in the image or the black American perspective.

As Thornton articulated, the media treatment of a subject shapes the audience discussion around it. Considering that photos "become an illustration for stories" (14, p. 480), when black people control the image, they can also take a more active role in controlling American stories about black people and culture. When that story is told from a white perspective by a white photographer, it can serve any ideology. Gleason & Hansen (6) made it clear that image control is perception control, and thus ideology control, and when white perspective controls the depiction of black models, it can fit them into white ideology and its need.

Tyler Mitchell and other black photographers have the freedom to tell a black story, to tell the story which aligns more closely with the perspective of the black subject, the model. By allowing Tyler Mitchell to photograph Beyoncé, *Vogue* freed Beyoncé, the black subject, from the dominating white perspective which could confine her into the roles it needed to serve its ideology. Rhetoric of racial domination is much less likely to occur when the visual rhetoric is controlled by another black American.

When black people have more control of the media and fashion industry, which influences the dominating appearance and visual trends of American culture, they include themselves in the public sphere instead of merely being assimilated to the white public sphere. By spreading black perspectives, they can speak more truly to the black audience, which "is one that is persuaded by tropes, knowledges, and terministic screens anchored in African American life and culture" (11, p. 30). When black people photograph black models, they can make images speak to knowledge of the African American community, thus including black audiences in the conception of the general

public sphere. This moves the entire public sphere closer to an inclusive space that does not cater only to white audiences.

White domination remains operative in the fashion world by continuing to prioritize the black body over the black mind as it works toward representation; the hiring of a black photographer marks rhetorical progress beyond this false dichotomy. The black body has always taken precedent over the black mind in the public imagination. As Mandziuk (7) highlighted in her discussion of the rhetoric of domination, white audiences are most fascinated by the physicality of black subjects; this is the very mechanism by which they constrain blackness to a visual image they can interpret as they will. The focus in anti-racist representation efforts only on the subject, rather than the creator, of visual rhetoric indicates that this attitude is still operative and allows whites to continue to dominate blacks by limiting them to mere bodies to be viewed and interpreted by whites. The underlying assumption is that the intellectual and creative work of the industry must be white; black people only belong if the white brain deliberately chooses to parade a black body on a cover or runway to benefit its brand.

This prevailing idea that black people are to be used as bodies rather than minds—in this case for white profit—can be traced back to Aristotle. In his *Politics*, he argued influentially that "the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very different; for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life… the bodies of freeman… [are] useful for political life in the arts both of war and peace" (1, pp. 1990-1991). In this writing, Aristotle laid the foundations for the separation of the dominant group, which in the U.S. became white Americans, and the subjugated group, which in the U.S. became black Americans. Even today, white people tend to be associated with artistic and intellectual endeavors requiring the brain, while black people are still associated with the body. Therefore, the black photographer is, within the American imagination, inconceivable; work towards increasing representation focuses on the visual, bodily model, who can be depicted in any fashion deemed right by the white artists.

By hiring a black photographer for what is considered to be the top artistic position in the fashion magazine world and allowing this artist to design the depiction of the prominent model on the cover demonstrates a willingness to acknowledge the brains of black Americans. Tyler Mitchell must have top-notch intellectual and creative capacities

to photograph a *Vogue* model; his body does not matter at all. Black photographer Rhea Dillon put this significance well: "Hire us… Not because we're black and you need to fill a quota, but because we are skilled at what we do and having a diverse eye behind the lens makes your brand or publication better" (2). In other words, the black photographer's significance lies not in the blackness of the body, but for the unique intellectual perspective of black artists.

The automatic assumption that the photographer, even of black models and cultural aesthetics, must be white continues a long-standing "white unless proven otherwise" assumption about positions which are not visible. As previously stated, black people are mere bodies in the American imagination; unless they are seen, the assumption is that they are not there. Most of the prevailing African American rhetorical scholarship focuses on the black people we can see; visual rhetoric dominates the field.

Yet in a fully desegregated, inclusive society where black people are well-represented everywhere, the public would both seamlessly and effortlessly imagine the invisible black American. Presently, we must term someone *black* before they become anything but white in the imagination, whether we conjure up a specific image. Ideally, we would imagine that a photographer may be black even without needing to deliberately form a mental picture of a black body holding a camera. As Nunley (11) highlights, the public sphere is not "an ideologically and racially neutral free-zone market of ideas" (p. 29). In the public sphere and the resultant American imagination, the neutral is white, so anyone not seen can be assumed to be white. Cadogan (2) too, in his examination of the lives of black photographers, recognized the white perspective as the *default*; this concept of default can be extended to the imagination and every aspect of public thought. The white perspective, the white photographer, is the default in the imaginations of executives at magazines, and of the public at large. Just as the public sphere is a "racialized, gendered, and heteronormative space" (11, p. 29), so, too, is the public imagination.

By hiring a black photographer, Vogue has hinted to audiences that the photographers behind its images could be black. As representation in invisible roles continues to expand, the public may eventually learn to imagine by default that any role could be held by a black person. The public would not need to shift its conceptual framework to fit in the black artist; instead, the black artist

would make just as much sense in the imaginations of people as the white artist.

Hiring black people into invisible roles, such as a Vogue cover photographer, functions rhetorically to sensitize visual depictions of black models, disrupt the black body/white mind dichotomy, and make possible the invisible black American in the imagination. This all serves to right the path toward desegregation and fair, diverse representation in the fashion industry and the whole American public sphere. The current rhetorical scholarship has well-documented the significance of visual rhetoric and rhetoric of domination over black Americans. Yet in its efforts toward inclusivity, it has not yet sufficiently considered the need for invisible black representation in the imagination. African American identity and subjectivity is already possible in the minds of black Americans, yet African American identity does not exist in an assumed fashion in the public's minds. It is time to recognize the intellectual vitality of the invisible black body.

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