Reimagining the Black Body through Portraiture: An Explication of Black Invisibility and the Reconstructive Power of Fashion and Photographic Images

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which the media has negatively depicted Black people, ultimately leading to an overwhelming absence of positive Black imagery. Through historical analysis of photographic projects from Tyler Mitchell and Dario Calmese as well as *Harlem On My Mind*, I will argue for the essential work of portraiture in achieving a new Black aesthetic, one that continuously redefines itself through the presentation of nuanced identities and demands increased exposure and visibility. Drawing from symbolic annihilation theory and the analysis of Pierre Bourdieu on the societal role of photography, I contend that the styled Black body, when presented via images and publicly affirmed by figures from high culture, renders expanded imaginations for visualizing Blackness.

Keywords: Symbolic Annihilation, Positive Imagery, Black, Absence, Body, Blackness, Fashion, Photography, Black Visibility, Black Invisibility

Introduction

In 1969, the Metropolitan Museum of Art broke tradition by exhibiting in its galleries people and cultures it formerly excluded from artistic discussion for the previous 99 years, since it was founded in 1870. The *Harlem On My Mind* exhibition, curated by cultural historian Allon Schoener, received brutal backlash from the art community, as "it brought African-American history to one of the world's preeminent art museums and placed it on par with the established icons of the Western tradition."[1] Throughout history, the cultural contributions of Black minorities have been designated as primitive and lowbrow by a privileged few acting as cultural gatekeepers who governed standards of art, beauty, and culture. The determining factor behind the decision to launch *Harlem On My Mind* was Allon Schoener, a white man, who used his

[1]Allon Schoener, "The Truth About Harlem On My Mind," *Harlem On My Mind*, New York Press, accessed on October 1, 2020, http://harlemonmymind.org/truth.html

privilege to define a precedent for dignifying the history and culture of African Americans. Although his actions generated positive representation for the Black community, they did not erase the fact that Black Americans had maintained limited agency in controlling the ways in which their people were portrayed throughout the media and by influential organizations defining culture for the masses.

For example, in the 125 year history of Vogue Magazine, this major fashion publication failed to hire African American photographers for cover shoots, until recently. In 2018, Beyoncé enlisted the creative services of fashion photographer Tyler Mitchell for her portrait session, making Mitchell the first African American to shoot a Vogue cover. His achievement served as a beacon of hope and empowerment for the Black community, which has suffered routinely from visual misrepresentation and denied access, that change is attainable, thus promoting the possibility for Black talent to enter spaces that were previously inaccessible. Welcoming a long overdue practice of offering opportunity for Black photographers, the September 2018 Vogue cover story marked a turning point within the magazine industry where Black people finally held the power to write and depict their own story. The role played by portrait photography in facilitating this milestone must not be overlooked.

In July of 2020, Vanity Fair followed in Vogue's footsteps by hiring Dario Calmese as the first Black photographer to shoot its cover. When asked about his emotions surrounding the accomplishment, Calmese expressed how humbled he felt to make history as the first, but he also emphasized how this moment should not be interpreted as him having more skill or talent than his industry counterparts, arguing that many other Black photographers *could have* easily been in his position if only given the opportunity to share their gifts. According to Calmese, we often

“mistake talent for access to opportunities.”[2] In other words, the lack of diversity within the magazine industry is an issue of access and not of a lack of Black imagemakers. Lack of access to influential platforms that widely define culture deny opportunities for Black artists to share visual interpretations of what it means to be Black directly from the perspective of Black people.

The Vanity Fair cover story featured award-winning actress Viola Davis intentionally posed to emulate the portrait of Whipped Peter.[3] Although controversial, the image sparked conversations about the violent history of slavery and its lingering implications by offering an alternative depiction, one that honored the original moment and elevated Black bodies simply by being portrayed on the cover of a magazine. In short, images influence our understanding of society and our relationship with ourselves. They construct our ways of seeing the world and our position within it, especially when the images we consume lead us to believe false narratives about access to space and definitions of beauty. Moreover, the context and conditions in which images are produced, distributed, and consumed contributes to the degree of impact they have when undoing the ramifications of sustained visual misrepresentation of marginalized communities.

Theoretical Frameworks

In his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall describes a picture of Lindford Christie carrying the Union Jack around his shoulders at the Olympics and how this image of a Black man representing the United Kingdom produced meaning that contradicted the prevailing notions about what it meant to be British. Hall argues that images are interpreted not only by the visually marked identifiers—in this case, Christies’

[2]André Wheeler, “Dario Calmese: Vanity Fair's first black cover photographer on his 'love letter to black women',” *Guardian*, July 2020, Retrieved from http://harlemonmymind.org/truth.html
[3]Whipped Peter was an enslaved African American who escaped from a Louisiana plantation in March 1863, gaining freedom when he reached the Union camp near Baton Rouge. He became known as the subject of photographs documenting the extensive scarring of his back from whippings received in slavery.

black skin, the Union Jack, and his male gender—but also through the unspoken biases and expectations of the viewer. He acknowledges that:

> Somehow this person who isn't what one thinks of normally as the majority cultural identity and ethnic identity – racial identity of the majority of British people – because the majority of British people, though the word "British" doesn't carry with it any specific reference at all to questions of race or color, one assumes that the British Olympic team might be full of white British people, and here is somebody who is obviously not.[4]

Therefore, there is an intersection between what the viewer expects to see and what is actually present in the image, which are equally important when establishing meaning and interpretation, according to Hall. However, I am most concerned with how Hall concludes his discussion by stating that "every image we see is being read in part against what isn't there," as this understanding provides an effective starting point for interrogating the various readings produced in the absence of positive, Black imagery. Is it possible to extract harmful interpretations of Blackness from persistent images of white beauty and excellence contrasted against Black invisibility or narrow representations of melanin? Is it reasonable to think that one can effectively erase a community from existence by preventing them from controlling their depiction in the media? The following theories help reach an acceptable conclusion on the matter.

In 1976, George Gerbner coined the term **symbolic annihilation** to describe the absence of representation of particular communities, often based on race, gender, sexuality, or other social identifiers (e.g. social-economic status, ethnicity, religion, etc). Initially, Gerbner introduced the idea by analyzing the effects of television dramas, claiming that "[r]epresentation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation."[5]

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[4]Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (London: Sage, 1997), 131.
[5]G Gerbner & L Gross, "Living with Television: The Violence Profile," *Journal of Communication* 4, no 4 (1976), 182.

Assuming the fictional world also extends to the universes created or captured in photographs, it is easy to draw connections between the impact of Black absence on-screen and in images because "[c]asting the symbolic world thus has a meaning of its own: the lion's share of representation goes to the types that dominate the social order."[6] Therefore, by limiting the number of Black people depicted in photographs, this erasure can imply that they are no longer viewed as desirable or aspirational. Instead, they can be defined as the antithesis of whiteness: ugly, primitive, and unworthy of praise.

In the industry of fashion portraiture, much time is spent casting models, styling looks, completing hair and makeup, designing extravagant sets, and determining suitable locations. Frequently, the final product depicts an unattainable version of reality, even though the commonsensical understanding of photographic images is their nature to represent the real world. Unfortunately, this is one of the common pitfalls of fashion photography, which contributes to the objectification of its subjects by using them to motivate cultures of desire, lust, and consumption. Nevertheless, it is vital to acknowledge the productive work of styling and presenting the Black body. As Carol Tulloch argues, "through articulating the emotions, desires, and differences of individuals, clothing functions as a form of symbolic resistance that enables a sense of self and dignity to be inscribed upon the body."[7] Additionally, Tulloch expands her argument by advocating for the term "post-black" as a way to describe individuals of the diaspora who use "style narratives" in order to explore and express what Black and Blackness mean in the present moment.[8] In spite of the negative implications of fashion, one cannot ignore its capacity to elevate annihilated communities by visually imagining them in positions that were previously inaccessible.

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[6]G Gerbner & L Gross, "Living with Television: The Violence Profile," 183.
[7]Carol Tulloch, *Black Style*, (London: V&A Publications, 2004), 17.
[8]Carol Tulloch, "Style-Fashion-Dress: From Black to Post-Black," *Fashion Theory.* 14(3): 283

Of course, this method of resistance does not operate without risk. Styling Black bodies in luxury brands and promotional accessories can lead to superficial delineations of Blackness or an outcome where "fashion becomes fetishized as a point of unattainable aspiration for the spectator."[9] Using the style and persona of Will Smith to analyze the impact of fashion on consumers, Sara Gilligan claims that "the accessorized black body is broken down and fragmented where the focus of desire is displaced from the clothes that accentuate the sexualized body to the asexual extremities through the promotion of sunglass, trainers, and hats."[10] In short, she concludes that "accessories function as a quick fix that the spectator can actually possess and thus, through consumption, one's life can be instantly transformed."[11] Furthermore, additional concerns arise when the spectator realizes that no amount of consumption of Smith's style will ever be rewarded with a newly improved life, or worse yet, that Smith and the spectator are no different—perpetually judged by the skin they embody. Smith's status as a Hollywood star is loosely held in balance by his ability to "present a fantasy of Black identity that ambivalently challenges the color line through a liberally racial vision of Black masculinity that calms white cultural fears."[12] In this sense, Black style functions as a commodity—as the "antidote to racism," manufactured by a privileged minority to serve their commercially motivated interests.[13]

Nonetheless, the social gains of presenting an aspirational version of Blackness through fashion outweigh the potential harms because at the intersection of clothing, accessories, and the body, Smith and other Black tastemakers offer representations of "new ethnic identities" that not only engage with notions of difference but also supply more diverse conceptions of ethnicity that

[9]Sarah Gilligan, "Fragmenting the Black Male Body: Will Smith, Masculinity, Clothing, and Desire," *Fashion Theory* 16, no 2 (2012), 185.
[10]Sarah Gilligan, "Fragmenting the Black Male Body: Will Smith, Masculinity, Clothing, and Desire," 186.
[11]Ibid
[12]David Magill, "Celebrity Culture and Racial Masculinities: The Case of Will Smith." In Elwood Watson (ed.) *Pimps, Wimps, Studs, Thugs and Gentlemen: Essays on Media Images of Masculinity*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 127.
[13]Ellis Cashmere, *The Black Male Culture Industry*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

are fluid, multiple, and dominated by transformation and performance.[14] The Black experience is deeply nuanced and constantly evolving, so it is beneficial to highlight these novel identities, especially since they often embody empowering characteristics of beauty, wealth, and opulence—which contradict the way Black people were historically depicted. On the functional level, fashion clothes the body and occasionally serves as a medium of self-expression. On the social level, fashion has the potential to disrupt societal norms, as "clothed identities have the capacity to be both contextually specific and playful, creating subject positions that intersect with and question not only cultural constructions of ethnicity, but also discourses of gender, class, and sexual identities."[15] These effects are multiplied when fashion is partnered with the art of photography.

In his book *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu discusses the everyday practice of photography and how it has the power to construct reality.[16] He also expands the theory of symbolic annihilation by describing it as a form of "gentle violence" often imperceivable to even its victims.[17] He notes:

> symbolic annihilation as a form of subtle violence which disregards the legitimacy of an identity. A society is susceptible to the media it consumes and the social norms as depicted by the media can be instructive to consumers as a model of behavior toward the minority group. Invisibility or negative portrayal of minorities in the media denies their existence in society. The result is that familiarity and behavioral codes are not well established and interaction is characterized by differences between groups.[18]

By leveraging the results of surveys and interviews and analyzing the attitudes of amateur and professional photographers, Bourdieu builds a strong case for the different roles of photography, claiming that some people use it as a means of preserving the present whereas other practitioners

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[14]Hall, Stuart. 1992. "New Ethnicities." In James Donald (ed.) Race, Culture and Difference, pp. 252-59. London: Sage.

[15]Sarah Gilligan, "Fragmenting the Black Male Body: Will Smith, Masculinity, Clothing, and Desire," 187.

[16]Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 112.

[17]Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 1.

[18]Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 166.

use it as an occasion for "aesthetic judgement" in which photographs become a destination for ethnic erasure and cultural tastemaking, often excluding minority communities.[19] Nevertheless, through the active capture and intentional positioning of Black bodies, the possibilities for redefining the aesthetics, notions, and definitions of Blackness on a global scale are promising.

In order to fashion new frameworks for visualizing progressive identities of Blackness and undoing the damage caused by Black invisibility, it is paramount to offer consistent depictions of Black beauty, Black love, Black power, and Black joy. More importantly, these images must be disseminated through media that was historically approved by elite cultural figures as legitimate sources of art in order to effectively demand Black visibility. For example, if Calmese's portrait of Viola Davis was published on the cover of Ebony, a magazine known for its history of championing Blackness, it would have been less successful in deconstructing systems of Black invisibility, dare I say entirely ineffective, because past standards of limited access and visibility for Black people would remain unchallenged. To quote Anya Gorkova, the photographer responsible for highlighting Russia's LGBTQ+ diversity in her recent portrait project titled *Russian Queer Revolution*, "it's about making people aware that these people exist."[20]

Production Assessment

In order to execute the production component of this project, I began by researching photography by Black artists. I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the role played by historic and contemporary image makers from the Black community and how they tackled the challenge of portraying the Black body amidst luxury, struggle, and beauty. My research led me to the contemporary work of prominent fashion and portrait photographers including, but not

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[19]Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, 100.
[20]Seward, Mahori. "The exhibition showcasing Russia's LGBTQ+ diversity." *i-D*. Accessed on September 15, 2020. https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/k7q5da/russian-queer-revolution-vogue-fabrics-dalston-exhibition

limited to, Tyler Mitchell, Joshua Kissi, Kwaku Alston, Dario Calmese, and Mark Clennon in addition to the historic images of Gordon Parks, Carrie Mae Weems, Chester Higgins, Deborah Willis, and Adger Cowans. Throughout their work, I observed a push for concepts that celebrated the multidimensionality of Blackness where Black people hold identities that extend well beyond their race. The images produced by these artists do the work of portraying diversity within the Black community and painting a powerful picture of Black beauty while constructing nuanced representations that ignore and challenge the hypercritical gaze of western hegemony. I knew that I wanted to infuse this tradition in my work.

Originally, I decided to photograph Black people. However, as the project progressed, I focused my lens specifically on Black women and elected to tell their story through the medium of fashion portraiture. I selected this medium as it was in the fashion industry where Black people were robbed of their style, dignity, and positive representation. Moreover, fashion was also a space where I experienced deep insecurity about how I chose to present myself to the world. As a child, I was bullied because of how I dressed. People said my shorts were too short and my pants were too tight, which dramatically crippled my self-esteem—consequently amplifying my internalized self-hatred for my Black skin. Nevertheless, it was through fashion that I discovered my confidence and authentic personality. It was this discovery that strengthened my connection to fashion and its ability to inscribe a sense of dignity and self on the body, as described by Carol Tulloch in her book titled *Black Style*. Therefore, fashion has the potential to radically question cultural constructions of racialized hate and Black invisibility. For these reasons, I wanted to produce a project where fashion served as a vehicle for reimagining the Black body through portraiture by contributing to the steadily growing vault of positive Black imagery, depicting Black people as beautiful, desirable, and perfectly enough.

The effectiveness of portraiture lies in its ability to force the viewer to face the subject and bear the emotional weight represented and evoked by the subject, momentarily. While achieving this outcome is desirable for me as a photographer commenting on the Black experience, I also recognize that the viewer is facing these subjects through my imaginings as they are presented in the final image, which has the potential to overshadow the subject and their voice: a consequence I wanted to avoid. Therefore, I included a secondary element to the image series: a set of oral interviews conducted with every Black woman I photographed in order to insert another perspective defining and commenting on the reality of Black life. This way, the final project is collaborative in the sense that I am modeling my subjects to portray aspects and characteristics of Blackness while they are sharing aspects of their experience as a Black person, specifically a Black woman in America.

This interplay also informed the structure of the interviews as I asked each guest about their thoughts on living as a Black woman in America and what this identity means for them. At the start of every interview, I contextualized the concept of the photo series and asked guests to say their full name and explain any significant meaning or backstory about it. An important element of these interviews was their candid authenticity in attempting to provide a space for Black women to be heard, uninterrupted. I informed my guests about potential questions, but we mainly let the conversation guide our dialogue. I also wanted to convey the nuanced identities occupied by Black women. Collectively, I interviewed aspiring models, film photographers, business owners, students, poets, and writers. By asking questions about professional goals, notable achievements, and wildest dreams, I helped demonstrate the diversity in talent, personality, and occupation amongst Black women.

In order to select models, I posted messages on social media explaining the concept of my project and the primary focus on Black women. I received replies from seven women: Courtney Reed, Dani Payne, Mia Almond, Lateshia Peters, Cristi Cruz, Toluwani Roberts, and Aishat Jimot. The casting process was neither selective nor extensive. The only requirement for women to participate in the project was for them to identify as Black. I did not want to filter the models by body type, skin complexion, or other traditional factors because I wanted my images to be motivated largely by the Black experience.

The exhibition is titled *When A Black Woman Speaks, You Listen…* In short, this photo series is a metaphorical ode that professes boundless love for Black Girl Magic by prioritizing the importance of allowing Black women to speak for themselves. Sadly, the names of far too many Black women like Breonna Taylor are reduced to lifeless hashtags that quickly fade in relevance. This project is an effort to honor the beauty of Black women before they slip into the afterlife. So much of what we know about Black women is told to us after the fact rather than us having the privilege to hear Black women tell and control their narrative. *When A Black Woman Speaks, You Listen...* provides a platform for seven black women to be known largely on their terms. My hope is that I have provided an occasion for others to hear and experience Black women that they would otherwise not know.

Reflection

In the process of creating and preparing this digital photo exhibition via Artsteps, I gained an appreciation for creating art under limitations due to the pandemic and remote learning and realized how projects often evolve into their necessary format as an artist continues to create. Initially, I planned to produce a fashion magazine with articles, interviews, and advertisements. However, I soon realized that this decision was overly ambitious given the circumstances and

shorter timeframe. As a result, I pivoted to designing a long term project in order to execute the original vision while still emphasizing the medium of photography throughout part one of my thesis. With the content produced this semester, I will assemble a fashion magazine that incorporates the images and stories I captured into a print publication.

My main challenge throughout the production process was unexpected cancellations. In the beginning, two models cancelled due to issues related to COVID, which placed me behind schedule. I overcame this obstacle by outlining a realistic timeline and being honest with myself about the actual possibilities. During review sessions, fellow artists and professors expressed concerns about the tendency of fashion photography to objectify and flatten its subjects, especially female subjects. In response to this constructive criticism, I chose to conduct oral interviews in order to offset the images of high fashion and luxury by encoding a voice behind the voiceless portrait, effectively eliminating the viewer's imagination about who might be returning their gaze. In theory, these images could stand alone, as they manage to empower and elevate the Black body by emphasizing Black beauty. However, the interviews work to augment the initial impact of these portraits by revealing new information about the Black women. Additionally, I selectively varied the images from wide-angle, full-body shots to low-angle portraits in order to exude an element of authority and power. When presented as a digital photography exhibition, the images, interviews, and captions manage to situate Black women as beautiful, dignified, and worthy of our undivided attention.

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