

Where Are All The Black Female Fashion Designers?

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The fashion industry has been criticized in recent years for its lack of racial diversity. While there has been a major push to put more Black models on the runway, the inclusion of Black designers has been largely overlooked. At New York Fashion Week (NYFW) Spring 2015, Black fashion designers presented only 2.7% of the total 260 shows (Friedman, 2015). The number of fashion lines presented at NYFW Spring 2015 by Black female designers was even smaller with only two designer brands, owned or co-owned by a Black female fashion designer, presenting collections at an official venue (Friedman, 2015). Although there are examples of successful Black female fashion designers outside of the context of NYFW, those trying to come up the traditional way by studying draping and patternmaking and apprenticing in ateliers rarely make it to premier status (Givhan, 2011).

Due to a number of factors, Black designers find it difficult to make a name for themselves in the fashion industry. The low numbers of successful Black designers can be attributed to the scarceness of arts and design education in public schools, an absence of support from family, as fashion design is often not regarded as a practical career within the Black community, and a lack of social and financial capital (Adams, 2015; Friedman, 2015). Black designers account for only one percent of designers covered by *Vogue* in recent years, with Black female designers making up just a fraction of that percent (The Museum, 2017).

At the Black Fashion Designers Symposium held at the Fashion Institute of Technology on February 6, 2017, designers Carly Cushnie and Michelle Ochs interviewed by fashion stylist June Ambrose discussed the absence of female designers of color in particular. Cushnie stated “it’s still surprising in this day in age [and] it is essentially an industry for women but there is still very few of us” (The Museum, 2017). Ochs goes on to say “Being female designers designing for women you’d think that would be something so simple and easy to come by and it’s not” (The Museum, 2017). When asked why they believe this dearth of female designers of color persists, Cushnie recalls that her classes at the Parsons School of Art and Design were filled with mostly female students so “it’s not like women aren’t educating themselves in fashion...it’s just, I think it’s later on, it’s the [lack of] opportunity...it’s still very much a boys club” (The Museum, 2017). Ochs further explains this gender inequality stating “with the guys they’re businessmen, we’re designers, we’re not [considered] businesswomen and designers” (The Museum, 2017). Even with the odds stacked against them many Black female designers continue to choose entrepreneurship over employment. They are willing to endure the trials and tribulations of business ownership, and thus define success on their own terms.

Black female fashion designers come from a rich heritage that uniquely prepares them for entrepreneurship. The early contributions made by Black women in the fashion industry have been “scantily researched and woefully unreported” (Alexander, 1982, p. 17). Throughout

history, thousands of Black creatives and artisans who have exhibited exemplary craftsmanship, professionalism and business acumen as seamstresses, dressmakers, modistes and tailors, never received a line of credit on any fashion history timeline or book of any period although it was those individuals, the unnamed and unheralded, who subtly shaped the fashion statements of their times (Alexander, 1982, Butler, 1976). The societal challenges and limitations they have faced throughout history and continue to face today have served as motivational factors, often pushing Black female fashion designers to seek solace through self-employment. The historical past of Black women is important in developing the complex understanding of the motivation that drives them to succeed despite the limitations place before them, as it reflects their determination to also succeed in the fashion industry as well as in their entrepreneurial pursuits.

Black women continue to choose entrepreneurship over employment as a means to balance their family and work lives and to escape what is known as the “glass ceiling” often faced by women in corporate positions or to avoid unemployment in a weak economy (Mattis, 2004). Some take the entrepreneurial plunge because it is one of the only arenas where they can not only match, but also outperform their male counterparts in terms of earning potential (Forbes, 2013). For Black women, entrepreneurship has become a form of empowerment. Black women are starting businesses at a faster rate than the population at large; however, they tend to have smaller than average firms, lower employment growth and are often underrepresented in many industries, including the fashion industry (Haimerl, 2015). Thus, it has become increasingly necessary to bring awareness to the marginalization and rejection that Black female fashion designers face within the industry, increase their visibility and provide access and exposure of their work.

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