

FASHION THAT PREVAILS: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY BLACK DESIGNERS

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

In this study I examine the experiences of contemporary Black fashion designers through their own words. I interviewed Black fashion designers in North America and asked about their journey working in the industry. In this study I have presented their struggles, triumphs, and joys. My research findings explored fashion design as a site where Black culture, dress, and identity are negotiated and produced.

The goals of this thesis research were to:(a) understand the contemporary industry landscape that Black designers are working within, (b) propose ways in which Black representation and empowerment could become a norm in the apparel industry; and (c) to determine a way to convey my research findings to the public that celebrates the successes of contemporary Black designers. In this thesis, I discuss factors that contribute to lack of diversity in the apparel industry by focusing on a sample of surveys and interviews with contemporary Black fashion designers. I have interpreted this data using cultural studies and social justice perspectives.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sian Brown earned a Bachelor of Fashion from Radford University, located in Virginia. During Brown's time at Radford University she learned the basics of the design process and craftsmanship in sewing, pattern making and illustration. Brown graduated a member of the Honors College at Radford University and had the opportunity to complete a capstone research project. Through this project Brown delved into the topic of Black design work and the history of Black designers. The research conducted at Radford, which focused on Black designers featured in *Ebony* magazine's "Fashion Fair," revealed statistical information about the visual representation of Black design work within the *Ebony Fashion Fair* articles and traveling runway shows.

Brown was later introduced to the art of curation during her time at Cornell University, when she participated in the production of the fashion exhibition *Women Empowered: Fashions from the Frontline*. The exhibition came to life as a product of collaboration including working with peers and research advisor Dr. Denise N. Green. Exhibition planning and curation has become a passion for Brown who has used what she learned about curation to develop her own research. As a major result and celebration of Brown's thesis research she curated the exhibition *Black Excellence: Fashion That Prevails*, which chronicles her research findings and celebrates the tremendous talent of Black designers who have influenced Black style.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Black fashion not only includes the ensembles that have shaped Black culture for centuries but the lives and experiences of the designers who persevered against all odds from slavery to ongoing racial inequalities. Attempts to suppress Black creativity and design have recurred throughout history. In today's fashion industry, Black designers are more often seen when it is necessary to legitimize cultural appropriation or to help ease the nuances of corporate or political inconsideration regarding race. The 2019 Business of Fashion Gala was a prime example of the nuances that Black fashion designers face. This particular instance involved the interrogation of Black designer Kerby Jean Raymond, in an attempt to obtain inside information about the Black community for a celebration of Black culture at the gala. However, the "celebration that resulted" was seen as an advertisement of traditional Black heritage. In the altercation with Business of Fashion, designer Kerby Jean Raymond wrote, "I'm offended that you gaslighted me, used us, then monetized it and then excluded us in the most disrespectful way to patronize companies that need "racist offsets" (Raymond, 2019, para 23). Are instances such as this proving racist hierarchies in the fashion industry?

Sociologist and humanities scholar Jean Marie Allman has discussed the implications for suppression throughout history, and has argued, "that dress and fashion have been centrally implicated in the forging of a distinct African modernity, through slavery and freedom, colonialism and conversion, ethnicity and nation, gender and generation, hybridity and cosmopolitanism, state-building and state authority, subject hood and citizenship" (Allman, 2004, p. 5). Against the backdrop of such suppression is the sociological journey of Black designers, which is emblematic of the Power to Prevail.

In this thesis, I discuss the factors that contribute to lack of diversity in the apparel industry through cultural studies and social justice perspectives. The goals of this thesis research were to: (a) understand the contemporary industry landscape that Black designers are working within, (b) propose ways in which Black representation and empowerment could become a norm in the apparel industry; and (c) to determine a way to convey my research findings to the public that celebrates the successes of contemporary Black designers. Qualitative methods were used to conduct this research. The first method was a survey distributed to a targeted convenience sample of African American designers in the United States. The survey was distributed through a snowball sample, in combination with a targeted sample of designers found through social media search. The second method used was in-person interviews with designers located in New York City. The qualitative data was analyzed thematically, which revealed shared challenges, obstacles, and ultimately the overarching characteristic of the Power to Prevail.

As background to this thesis, I focused on recent fashion history as context for contemporary Black designers' experiences. The historical record provides understanding for the study of current issues related to representation (or lack thereof) in the apparel industry. In what follows, I provide a brief overview of Black design and style, which has contributed to the contemporary atmosphere of Black design work in the 21st Century.

Slavery and the Black Church

The creative liberation in the 1970s is contrasted by experiences of prior designers. Allman has noted that historical analyses and examination of dress contribute to our understandings of the political and material ties that bind struggles for Black freedom (Allman, 2004, p.1). Slavery and the Black church have been two major influences on the definition and evolution of Black style and design. The dichotomies of these events have been used to propel the

concept of what contemporary Black design signifies in the 21st century. Enslaved people did not have the opportunity or allowance to wear certain styles, trends, or materials while captive. Meanwhile, Black churches allowed the freedom to express distinctive Black styles and honor Black beauty.

To begin, slavery had a dramatic impact on the fashion and clothing of African Americans. Black people were forced to leave the continent of Africa, but they retained a connection to their roots through influence from diverse traditions in African cloth and ensembles. Clothing and fashion changed drastically after Black migration through the slave trade. This drastic change after the slave trade differed from the traditional African diaspora. Fashion scholar Eulanda Sanders has described the change as, "...lack of appearance choices, denial of appropriate clothing and accessories, and brutal alterations to body, skin, and hair, sometimes a result of jealousy". (Sanders, 2011, p.279). Changes to enslaved persons' clothing, which also were noted by Sanders were "modified to eliminate her former cultural identities, amend her gender identity, and enforce a new chattel identity" (Sanders, 2011, p.278). This change to many, not only erased cultural meaning but denied comfort as well.

After arrival to America, the function of clothing became considerably different. The clothing prepared for enslaved people consisted of scrap materials and Sanders has noted that "garments were devalued and made from inferior fabrics" (Sanders, 2011, p. 269). Sanders has described slavery ensembles as lacking agency. The regulation of this clothing was forced and left enslaved people with no other options for clothing. Enslaved people did not have authority over appearance choices, were denied appropriate clothing and accessories, all whilst undergoing "brutal alterations to body" (Sanders, 2011, p.279). Clothing for the enslaved people was meant for working, yet it did not provide comfort for the extreme tasks enslaved people endured. Sanders

described the deprivation of clothing that the enslaved people faced when it came to their apparel as lacking the proper utility necessary for humans to suffice and appease comfort in both physical and mental aspects. Ultimately, slaves were not suited with clothing that would aid in their survival (Sanders, 2011, p. 273). Withholding protective clothing communicated to enslaved people that they did not have the control to obtain the basic necessities needed for function or comfort. This garb was inadequate to complete the demands of the strenuous tasks that they were ordered to do.

Enslaved people were not allowed to change or alter their clothing to better suit their needs and had a strict and scarcely manipulated style within boundaries. The clothing of enslaved people was harshly regulated by slave owners and they were allowed very little room for creativity in its styling. American history scholar Dr. Noliwe Rooks has pointed out that, emancipated women or house slaves may have served as models of acceptable appearance for other enslaved African Americans (Rooks, 1996, p. 25). Blacks, although under strict regulations, would adopt various styling methods and used appearance processes that much like contemporary trends were replicated to achieve certain looks. The idea of the oppressor and suppressed fashion begins to change with emancipation giving Blacks more availability to proper clothing and access to participate in the process of making clothing.

Elizabeth Keckley

One of the first recorded Black female pioneers who brought prominence to sewing and crafting was Ms. Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley. Keckley was a Black civil activist and seamstress, born into slavery in Virginia, in 1818. She used her design talents to rise above her circumstances. Along with sewing for her master's family as many female enslaved women did, came the development of a talent that would aid her immensely in her future endeavors. After purchasing her freedom, Keckley moved to Washington D.C. in 1860, where she would later open her own

dressmaking shop. By 1865, Keckley had employed 20 African American women to sew at her seamstress shop (Grant, 2016, para 5). Keckley, a Black female entrepreneur during this time had an especially rare and commendable situation and was able to hire and teach other Blacks the process of dressmaking. Keckley was commissioned to work for historical women such as Confederate generals' wife, Mrs. Robert E. Lee, Varnia Davis, and some of Keckley's most famous works were for Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckley opened an opportunity for Black creativity in a seemingly uncolored space. She pioneered a space for other Black seamstresses and paved the way for future dressmakers because of her position as a designer and in part, as an acquaintance and dressmaker for Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln. Ms. Keckley pioneered for other Black business-minded women to enjoy being creative in a developing apparel industry that had experienced limited influence by African Americans. However, this was just the beginning of the extensive evolution that would affect all apparel designers to follow. It is important to recognize the creativity Keckley was able to express through clothing given the restrictive and segregated state that America was in at the time. As the dawn of emancipation became widespread the space that Blacks inhabited opened up opportunity for more creative expression, although still within limits.

As Black people later gained more access to elaborate textiles and moderate freedom to express individuality through clothing, the Black church became the new safe place for expression through apparel. Fashion studies scholar, Gwendolyn O'Neal has argued that the "Negro church" served as a social center and that no one was excluded based on color prejudices. O' Neal also pointed out that church served as the place where people actively engaged in the reworking of definitions and issues of importance. "The Black church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the Black community" (O' Neal, 2017, para 13). The church became a community tool for

Blacks to utilize in order to have access to a better life. At this time Whites began to notice the unique style that Blacks were capable of creating.

As time went on and style and design evolved, so too did the space and the effects of the church on the Black community. Today, contemporary “church style” has become very relaxed in comparison to the vivid colors, elaborate fabrics and accessories that had characterized Black “church style” of the past. Although evidence and inspiration of church influence can be still seen in today’s wardrobes, the originality of “church style” can be commemorated as the first influences of unregulated African American creativity and design.

1920s -1940s: Harlem Renaissance, Rise of the “Negro Market”

Prior to 1920, the leisure class had been comprised of and mainly dominated by Whites. The 1920s ushered in the first significant visibility of the Black leisure class. American historian Susannah Walker has noted that “At the turn of the century, Booker T. Washington encouraged African Americans to focus on becoming an effective participant in Americas capitalist’s involvement or success” (Walker 2007, pg.12). In the 1920s and 30s, outside of the beauty industry, White companies ignored the Black consumer market. Walker has stated, “Selling beauty products to black women created lucrative opportunities for white companies, as well as for African American entrepreneurs” (Walker 2007 p.14). The advertising opportunities for Blacks did not go over well for everyone. Walker later mentioned that in the 1920s and 1930s, although marketing in Black publications created an increase in the amount of sales, trends recognition was not welcomed by many, and most felt threatened by the idea (Walker, 2007, p.13). Nonetheless, Black consumption of goods continued to grow as the style of the 1920s became more glamorous and classical. Black style had many influences from jazz and musical performance, and these created a space for African American fashion to become more sophisticated through dress than

ever before. The Harlem Renaissance affected fashions' progress tremendously. Walker noted that African Americans in Harlem did like to spend on buying luxury clothing and accessories (Walker, 2007, p.15). There was the assumption that Blacks were too poor to buy luxury goods, but this assumption did not always hold true.

Fashion studies scholar Carol Tulloch used a portrait to analyze fashion of a 1920s Harlem Renaissance Black couple. She described the portrait painted by Van Der Zee in order to analyze the tropes and realities associated with being Black in Harlem and in America. In the portrait, the couple used upscale fashion accessories to defy what the average ideal of what Black fashion was considered (Tulloch, 2016, p. 74). Tulloch noted that the couple's fashion "...is a means of comprehending how black urbanites connected with their space within a black city, within a white country" (Tulloch, 2016, P.74). Walker has noted that Barnett who was a progressive Black businessman wrote in 1930, "If we are to have a segregated institution, we ought to get whatever economic values go with such forced solidarity" (Walker, 2007, p .17). At this time there was still a segregated beauty and fashion industry.

During the 1920s Black leisure fashion was a way to unify university students although segregation was still prevalent. Blacks were seen as able to obtain and flaunt symbols of wealth that were once only meant to be obtained by their counterparts. The newly formed Black leisure class contributed to fashion through their visible ability to consume luxury fashion products such as fur coats and Cadillacs that had once been, in a sense, segregated due to class structure. This conspicuous consumption would pour out into a conception of a new market. It is important to realize that the rise of the "Negro Market," a term used by Walker, would be pivotal for the acceptance of African American designers to emerge. Walker pointed out that, In the 1920s, African American women had gained success in beauty culture bringing employment and revenue

back into Black communities (Walker, 2007, p.14). This was time when Black women especially were begging to affect the beauty industry.

Blacks became more urbanized as time progressed and were able to generate more money in big cities. Due to the Great Migration the rise in the proportion of African Americans living in cities increased from 27 percent in 1916, to 35 percent in 1920, and increased further to 44 percent in 1930 (Walker, 2007, p.15). Black people could earn more in cities than in rural areas. During the 1940s, and through the 1960s, the “Black is beautiful” movement started to take form. Demand for Brown and Black models was increasing with the rise of the “Negro market”. Both of these groups faced their share of growing prominence as well as hardship. Although Black entrepreneurs were working tirelessly their “Campaigns were not able to convince advertisers to entice Black consumers until after the post – World War II era” (Walker, 2007, p.20). Despite the lack of representation geared toward the segment of Black consumers, the market continued to grow.

The Black work force during this time was predominantly prejudiced, but that did not stop the expansion of the “Negro market”. Walker has stated that, “Blacks had lower incomes than their counterparts, African Americans were willing to spend on buying new cars and high-end household items and toiletries (Walker, 2007, p. 90). Due to fear of the Great Depression, American consumption rose. Walker has noted that “1940s and 1950s advertising that portrayed the suburban “good life” was, at least initially, as much an attempt to seduce wary Americans to buy as it was a reflection of popular desires” (Walker, 2007, p.87). Black consumers valued luxury goods and would continue with style-based purchases that promoted lifestyle trends.

Gender historian Laila Haidarali stated that “... in 1940, white women comprised 24 percent of the clerical labor force, African American women represented less than 1 percent of workers in this field. By 1950, those numbers changed to 31 percent and 4 percent respectively;

by 1960, statistics showed 33 percent of white and 8 percent of African American women working as “clerical and kindred workers” (Haidarali, 2005, p.11). Haidarali has mentioned that in 1940 African American women comprised 4 percent of the clerical workforce, and in 1960 compromised 5 percent (Haidarali, 2005, p .11- 12). The numbers for African American women entering the workforce was continuing to grow; this trend was likewise reflected in the statistics of annual income. Walker has noted earnings going from \$3 billion to more than \$10 billion from 1920 to 1943 as the annual income for African Americans increased. World War II did open up new employment opportunities for African Americans and that they received substantial improvements in wages (Walker, 2007, P. 87). Although African Americans were not fully representative in the work force the emerging “Negro market” was gaining strength and visibility through magazines such as Ebony magazine and fashion advertisements. This visibility would soon aid in producing a unique setting for creative liberation in the late 1960s and 70s. In the 1920s and 1930s, the focus of White corporations’ advertising catered to a perceived interest in racial desegregation of African Americans but as time progressed, looking forward to the 1970s, this ideal had shifted to the promotion of the “soul market” (Walker, 2007, P. 94). The shift of embracing Black culture would breed a movement of a certain type of liberation that Whites and African American had never experienced.

1960s & 1970s

During the sixties there was a growth in shopping from print catalogs and “mom and pop” stores. Black fashion visibility began to truly pick up momentum in the 1960s. The straight hair styles that were adopted in the 1940s and 50s would make way for the natural un-pressed, and non-chemically treated afro look of the 1960s and 1970s (Walker, 2007, p.110). Rooks stated that “hair in 1976 spoke to racial identity politics as well bonding between African American women. Its

style could lead to acceptance or rejection from certain groups and social classes, and its styling could provide the possibility of a career” (Rooks, 1996, p.6). Political activist Angela Davis argued that the Afro had been reduced to a hairstyle of the past and, this ideological development during the 1970s, she argued that the hairstyle negotiated in diminishing “a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion” (Walker, 2007, p.169). The afro look was not used as it should have been, and this notion was supported from the Whitewashed pages of ads publications and literature. The advocacy of a political agenda to urge African American women to groom themselves as White women would produce for example, to straighten their natural hair textures.

The rise of the Afro look played a major role in Black style and advertising in the 1970s. Walker has recounted that “advertising firms and product marketers rushed to find marketing strategies that might capture what they referred to as the “soul market” (Walker, 2007, pg.170). Black women have used their clothing to represent “Soul Style” as described by fashion scholar Tanisha Ford who has argued that the afro look and its evolution from the 1970s to the present millennium is meaningful, as it started to shape a movement and provided empowerment and even protection from threat. Through the natural look, soul, and the Black power movement a sense of pride was created. This was a time when Black became profitable, and many White beauty brands not only began marketing Black products but began creating products for Black consumers. Ford has stressed the importance of the afro “Soul Style” in which female activists used dress as a means to challenge the patriarchy and Black consciousness (Ford, 2015, p.159). With “Soul style” in mind, Black people were able to participate and follow the movement of the trends of this time, bringing about Black expression and the distinctives of Black style.

After the emergence of the “Negro market”, accompanied by the Afro look and “Soul Style”, it seemed befitting that this was the perfect space and opportunity for Black fashion

designers to utilize. However, due to the industries perceptions of Blackness, Black designers have been mainly categorized as “Black” rather than just “designers”. In the 1960s Black designers may have felt the pressure to design with a “Soul style” or political aesthetic, due to the industries gravity to this trend at time. Tulloch described “post Black” a term coined recently by Thelma Golden in the 1990’s as “...a means to framework the young generation of African American artists who recognized and valued their [B]lack heritage across various cultural and historical fronts but wanted the freedom to exist without categorization” (Tulloch, 2015, p.262). The pressure of categorization on Black designers to prove themselves multifaceted and able to please the demands of a White capitalistic society have been a troublesome continuum in the 1960s up until the 2000s. Ford has noted, “There was a time when African fashion was considered a bit of a joke in Europe... but now African fashion designers are getting their own back and producing clothes every bit as good as the world's top designers” (Ford, 2015, p. 163). The issues associated with skin color, respect, and representation are still a downfall that has made its way into the contemporary apparel industry. Black designers do face the challenge to cater to certain aesthetics that are desired by industry standards.

However, Blacks began to celebrate fashion more openly during the 1960s. Black fashion parades were feted outside of church functions. This gave African Americans the opportunity to express and celebrate their fashion and style together in a new more expansive space, the public. Dr. Tanisha Ford has stated, “In the early twentieth century, Black Americans began exhibiting their style innovations in formal shows, appropriating department stores' fashion showcases as a model for their own style shows. The idea of strolling down a runway dressed in custom-made clothing was not an unfamiliar concept to African Americans. When enslaved women and men wore their brightly colored finest to church, they paraded from the plantation to the church house”

(Ford, 2015, p. 54). Ford noted, “The fashion parade became a popular custom among the enslaved, which endured in the postbellum years. In the World War I era, the concept of the Sunday parade and the department store style show were melded, resulting in a cultural phenomenon that became popular in black communities throughout the country” (Ford, 2015, p.54). The church was a comfortable and safe place to begin displaying that expression but later gave African Americans more confidence and freedom to transition into “fashion parades”. These parades seem to solely place the importance on the liberation and value of fashion and Black beauty.

The apparel industry took an unexpected shift as the 1970s hippie era and street style movement rose to popularity. With these trends the American mindset began to open up and expand to an era for acceptance and peace. Designers such as Stephen Burrows, Patrick Kelly, and Willi Smith were able to navigate the industry during this occasion for open diversity. A unique opportunity was presented to designer Stephen Burrows. He was invited as one of the 5 American designers to present at the Battle of Versailles show in France. The show took place in November of 1973 and is known as the evening that fashion changed its course. Before the show in the 1970s the atmosphere in America had shifted. It was the end of the Vietnam war and the 70s gave visibility to gay rights and women’s rights movements (Mitchell, 2016). Black figures were becoming more prominent. In 1973, couture had already started to diminish as the culture was in rapid change and seamlessly ready-to-wear took over. Stephen Burrows made a statement that “Creativity in New York City was at an all-time high. I don’t know if it will ever be like that again” (Mitchell, 2016). On a liberating and equally diverse level the space that fashion created in the 1970s was unique and admirable. Burrow’s design signature worked with colors against Black model’s skin tones. His inspirations for design varied from the homeless to all of his other experiences in America.

Although Burrows was not one of the clients of Ms. Eleanor Lambert, who was the curator for the Versailles shows, Burrows was trusted to compete at the same level and caliber to that of the other designers. He occupied a considerably unique space, having the opportunity to design with some of America's and Europe's most luxurious designers. This was the first time that a Black designer would be considered to compete with other designers of this status. Burrows went on to surpass his competitors in the Versailles show, showcasing a collection filled with vibrant color which took the French by surprise. He was able to liaise culture and fashion all in one statement. Stephen recalls the French reactions and stated, "They have never seen Black girls so beautiful!" But he wasn't the only one highlighting Black beauty. Anne Kline chose to showcase African American beauty through her designs at the Versailles show as well (Mitchell, 2016). The advocacy of liberation across race, class, and gender surely impacted fashion as well as the Battle of Versailles show. Designers such as Oscar de la Renta and Ann Klein understood that the importance of diversity is what was a pivotal point on their success in the fashion battle against France. This point in time seemed like a dream for a Black apparel designer to take one's career to the next level.

There are many Black designers during the 70s that are just as admirable as Stephen Burrows and Willi Smith. Vogue editor Brooke Bobb has stated "[Smith] changed the way that men and women dressed for work, for special occasions, and everything in between (Bobb, 2019, para 1). Although, the space that they occupied and the accessibility to opportunity was quite different, Walker has stated, "It is important, therefore, to understand the influence of such factors as migration and urbanization, class dynamics, and the rise of mass consumer culture on the history of African American commercial beauty culture and commercialized beauty ideals. In addition, one must pay close attention to the connections between African American beauty culture and

black consumerism in general, linking both to twentieth century racial politics.” (Walker, 2007, p.207). The importance of understanding what Black apparel designers have endured and the beauty culture that they have had to curate has shed light on how upcoming contemporary Black designers can navigate the industry with more ease.

Contemporary Apparel Industry

In 21st century American society there is evidence of racial and economic division and inequality. Sixty-six percent of African American men were employed, and 70 percent of African American women were employed, and the African American unemployment rate in 2019 was at 6.7 percent altogether (blackdemographics.com, 2019, para 1). The contemporary fashion industry specifically has also had its fair share of setbacks as well as opportunities for Black designers. With regard to the demographics, sociologist Ashley Mears has noted in 2011 the quantity of fashion model bookers and has stated “About half of the bookers and staff (fifteen) were male, and among them nine identified as gay men, while just one of the eighteen female bookers identified as lesbian. Six of the New York bookers were of non-White ethnicity (four Latinos, one Asian, one Black); all of the eleven bookers in London were White. These characteristics reflect the widespread belief that fashion is an industry with high proportion of White gay men and straight women” (Mears, 2011, p. 145). The notion that the industry is run by majority of White gay men and wealthy White women, shows the hidden side of the apparel industry that is not seen by the public eye. A person can look at mainstream fashion outlets and measure or make assumptions about the diversity of designers and models since they are often showcased to the public eye. But to understand the true demographics of the gatekeeper behind the scenes is very important to identify when considering diversity. These similar demographics can be seen in other facets of the industry as well.

African Americans working in the industry are underrepresented and not given the same opportunities as easily as their counterparts. According to fashion scholar Van Dyk Lewis, “Black fashion designers who attempt to achieve recognition at the mainstream have never been successful. Commercial failure in the mainstream does not appear to occur at the conceptual, design or manufacture stages of apparel development. Instead difficulties occur in the stages where marketing and promotion take place” (Lewis, 2002, p.177). With regard to the statistics about the lack of diversity, fashion editor Lindsay Wagner wrote:

“There have never been more than one or two black editors-in-chief of any major U.S. magazines, and only one black designer leading a major American fashion brand and, up until this month (August 2018), no black photographer had ever shot the cover of *Vogue*. Only 15 of the 495 CFDA members are black, and only ten black designers have ever won a CFDA or CFDA/*Vogue* Fashion Fund award.... Less than 10 percent of the 146 fashion designers who showed at the major fall 2018 shows for New York Fashion Week were black” (Wagner, 2018, para 6).

The scarcity of the diversity in demographics is concerning as there are many Blacks interested in fashion but are not receiving credit for talent, skill, and hard work. Wagner also has shared some experiences of what it is like to be Black and work in the contemporary fashion industry. When Wagner asked other Black colleagues about their experiences, she mentioned, “I heard honest accounts of what it feels like to view every other black person as a threat because job opportunities are so scarce” (Wagner, 2018, para 7). Wagner has noted that Blacks are facing limitations that include financial barriers, social obstacles, colorism, bias, and plain old racism (Wagner, 2018, para 7). Commenting on one of her research findings, she feared that the industry had not yet come to terms with race if another fellow Black woman working in the industry urged and advised

Wagner to “dim my blackness” (Wagner, 2018, para 1). However, despite the notion that to navigate the industry one must dim her Blackness, the industry also has had the ideal assumption for Black designers to create exotic looks which limit designers of color to an ideal of what “Blackness” should be.

The industry is slowly disposing of this idea since it has changed and been reshaped over time. The new development for Black designers to seemingly propel or stand out in the contemporary space is to design with a political mindset or voice through clothing, or to obtain a style that resonates with Black culture that then propels itself into the mainstream or national market. Many Black designers can be seen using politics and political figures in their collection and career objectives. An example included apparel designer and rapper Kanye West as well as the designer Kerby Jean Raymond. These designers have both used their brand and image to stress or bring visibility to a political movement or interest. On a promising note, Kerby Jean Raymond has used his platform to express his distaste of labels being used as identifiers. Raymond has felt as if he has been placed in a box as a designer for being recognized solely by Blackness. Raymond previously stated, “Don’t label me as a black designer, I’m black, but I’m also a designer” (American Fashion, 2018, para 6). Raymond mentioned that he walked out of a conference regarding diversity in fashion because the theme of the discussion primarily focused on how activism and inclusion are trends that are good for business. “It’s not a trend,” he stated. “I question everything, though. I’m cognizant of my place and ... why I’m being asked to speak about my race versus my story?” (American Fashion, 2018, para 6) Raymond has expressed his concerns for this issue and has mentioned that he wishes to not be identified solely as a Black apparel designer.

As many other Black contemporary designers may have faced similar challenges, the labels from society still continue to plague Black designers. It is important in the contemporary fashion

industry, to recognize how Black designers label themselves, their target customers, who they are trying to please, as well as the goals they have for themselves as designers and for their brands. It might be faulty to make the assumption that Black designers want to please European consumer markets and/or gain national exposure. Clearly, Blackness does matter in the apparel industry. If it were not so, Black designers would not have been labeled or categorized as such for years.

The emergence of social media has impacted African American culture tremendously. Likes, shares, views and reposts rule the culture of the 21st century. Social media has been used to highlight and record many instances of unfair treatment of Blacks, including police brutality and other everyday instances of racism. The use of social media and other platforms has caused the Black community to become stronger as a whole in advocating for social justice. With the ever-growing *Black Lives Matter* movement and hashtags such as #BlackExcellence, and #Melanin, the growth, strength and virtuousness of Black culture can be seen and celebrated every day. Through social media, we have been able to see and share one another's struggles and victories. More protests have been done through smart phones or online versus the decline of tangible and in-person communication, meetings, and protests due to the influence of social media. The new methods of protest have had its own share of advantages and disadvantages.

Presently, capitalism, culture and societies' standards move at an expeditious rate. Technology has been favorable and, in some cases, a hinderance to the new age apparel industry. With more than 17 fashion seasons per year, consumption of apparel is ever growing. With the definition of luxury brands, and goods evolving to become an ambiguous concept the market for some of America's favorite traditional luxury brands struggle to compete and serve the fast fashion markets of today's society. Although this may be unfortunate news in some respects to heritage brands this may be astounding news for small and forthcoming designers with niche markets.

With a small number of Black designers reaching mainstream publicity one could assume that there are not many Black apparel designers navigating the industry today. However, the space for Black designers to utilize is more unique than ever. The opportunity for Black designers to sell and market on social media and online is greater than ever before. Online consumers may be unaware of and disregard the designer's skin-color to make purchases based solely on the aesthetic of the clothing.

Previously stated statistics indicate that the current apparel industry faces its own share of downfalls and victories regarding race and inclusion. Once the industry has come to terms with the issue of diversity the reconceptualizing of race and its facets would help tremendously to advance of Black representation. Regardless of race, the subdivision of gender still faces its own set of much different problems. Contemporary female designers have not seen as much representation in media and literature as male designers. Designers such as Patrick Kelly and Stephen Burrows have grown in popularity due to their tremendous design efforts and talents. Burrows has gone on to become one of the most famous African American designers. However, one is less likely to come across female designers in mainstream media and women have often been overlooked, much like many of today's African American designers. Although we have often seen male designers there are female African American designers that are deserving to occupy spaces in the industry. Female designers have mainly occupied the space of custom and tailoring designs for a particular clientele. Nonetheless, notably their talents are just as notable as top established designers works.

Cultural Studies Approaches and Fashion Theory

Overall, my thesis addresses the designers' experiences within the context of the fashion industry broadly but interpreted with consideration of various cultural studies approaches and

fashion theories. Understanding these various frameworks will contribute to better analysis of the current situation of Black designers. Among the frameworks that will be discussed is the Critical Race Theory, which is a movement including a collection of activist and scholars interested in transforming the relationships among, race, racism and power (Delgado, R & Stefancic, J. 2001, Pg. 2). I also include the framework of Black feminism which Sanders has noted, “The theory evolved out of the unrecognized oppression of women of color” (Sanders, 2011, p. 270). Lastly, I consider a framework known as the Injustice of Appearance which, “questions the disadvantages associated with appearance” (Rhode, 2009, p. 1048). I will briefly discuss Black apparel design in terms of each of these frameworks.

The first framework is Critical Race Theory. CRT emerged out of the legal systems and has been used by Civil Rights activists. Its purpose has been to define engrained class struggles, and oppression rooted in America. I have used the Critical Race Theory to aid in the review of data from the survey and to analyze and themes from qualitative data with regard to social injustices or general problems that designers have faced. The CRT has been described by social scientist Daniel Solórzano as a pledge to social justice that scholars take action toward “eliminating racial oppression as a broad goal of ending all forms of oppression” (Solórzano, 1998, p. 122). Critical Race theory has heavily influenced arguments that advocate for social justice.

The second framework is, Black Feminism, which has been described this way by Patricia Hill-Collins: “It challenges Black women to confront their own views on sexism and women’s oppression” (Collins, 2001, p.13). I have used this framework to highlight the different experiences including marginalization that Black female designers have faced versus male designers. These experiences included general lack of talent acknowledgment, the lack or recognition and less

respect, and the endurance to sustain an intense work ethic. Intersectionality is very important when striving for overall inclusion of, race, class, gender throughout the research processes.

The third framework is a cultural studies approach that was coined by Sociologist Stuart Hall. In this writing, Hall's notes on representation were utilized in a discussion of the intersections of race and the apparel industry. Hall has stated, "it is diversity of the black experience that we must now give our undivided creative attention". He has noted that it is important to recognize the other kinds of differences that place, position, and locate black people. It is not just race that makes humanity different but the negotiating of "different kinds of differences"—of gender, of sexuality, of class (Hall, 1996, p.476). Intersectional differences have been sometimes masked by society but have impacted our daily lives. This has been important to consider in this research.

The fourth framework dealt with the disruption and reevaluation of the institutional hierarchies in America. Collins has questioned the relationships of domination and subordination structured and maintained in America and how those relationships can be reconstructed (Collins, 1996, p.29). Collins has written about the construction of societies positionality with regard to race, sex, gender, social class, and sexual orientation. Collins stated, "I focus on two basic questions. First, how can we reconceptualize race, class and gender categories of analysis? Second, how can we transcend the barriers created by our experience with race, class and gender oppression in order to build types of coalitions essential for social exchange?"(Collins,1996, p.27) Collins has urged the reader to reevaluate how their viewpoint of race, class, and gender could encourage empathy towards social change. In this writing I have asked, "Who are the subordinate and dominant groups of people in the apparel industry?" and "How are these hierarches affecting Black fashion designers?" I have also asked, "Where would underground Black designers fall into this system and does it contribute to their positionality in the industry?"

The fifth framework addressed is the Injustice of Appearance, which is discrimination based on appearance. American legal scholar, Deborah Rhode noted, “Despite the progress made since the “[B]lack is beautiful” and analogous social movements, dark skin color is still associated with discrimination both within and among races (Rhode, 2009, p.1054). Rhode stressed the unfortunate injustices of discrimination based on appearance, which is often unrecognized and overlooked by its perpetrators. Rhode stated, “Such bias falls along a continuum. At one end is discrimination based on characteristics that are difficult or impossible to change...At the other end of the continuum are purely voluntary characteristics, such as fashion and grooming (Rhode, 2009, p. 1036-1037). By having applied the Injustice of Appearance to the experience of Black designers has shed light on some of the limitations, obstacles, and adversities that they have faced with regard to appearance. Designers in this study have mentioned times when they themselves or their brands have faced discrimination due to Afro centric appearance, which in turn has hindered certain opportunities. Rhode, to that end, has pointed out that “The clearest argument for banning discrimination based on appearance is that it offends principles of equal opportunity and individual dignity” (Rhode, 2009, Pg. 1048). Rhode has also mentioned that If Black is not seen as beautiful in the eyes of African Americans and especially their counterparts there will always be room for social injustice if the laws that discount discrimination against appearance aren’t implemented and put to use (Rhode, 2009, p.1054).

Lastly, to analyze themes from the results of the survey I have used a conceptual framework model that I created to represent and interpret Black designers’ which was the “Power to Prevail.” The Power to Prevail conceptual framework is an overarching theme that connects the designer’s experiences. Scholar Susan Kaiser has built upon Raymond Williams term *Structure of Feeling*, which has been described as the combination of structure with feeling. It is the notion that many

people experience similar emotions that are in part derived and articulated through cultural discourses (Kaiser, 2012, p.41). I have argued that the Power to Prevail is a testament to the combining of structure with the feeling in many, if not all of the Black designers’ journeys featured in the study. The Power to Prevail is seen in the way African Americans have used dress and apparel design to shape the way they themselves as well as others are adorned. The will to adorn has been continuously exhibited in Black culture for decades.

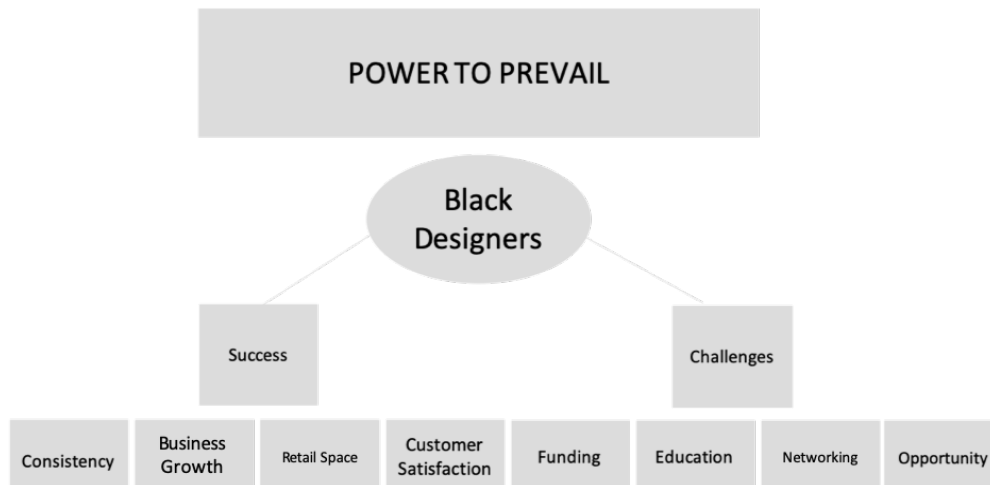


Figure 1 : Power to Prevail Map

I have designed a map to visually display the integration of the Power to Prevail as an overarching theme that affect multifaceted interactions, motivations, and interests, which all effect Black designer’s lives and their careers respectively. Later in this writing, applying the Power to Prevail framework I have addressed some of the grey areas or the ambiguities in contemporary desires of Black fashion designers that occur. Using this framework is useful to determine if these breakdowns propel or hinder more so capitalistic Americas standards of success, which is at times focused on monetary gain. In the solutions that I proposed I have hoped to have aided in the contribution to fill this “grey area” or gap to empower designers which may have been wedged in these ambiguous structures that impend on underground designers. Before the exploration or interactions with Black designers began an IRB, exemption approval was obtained in October of

2018 to conduct the surveys and interviews. The goals of this thesis research were to: (a) understand the contemporary industry landscape that Black designers are working within, (b) propose ways in which Black representation and empowerment could become a norm in the apparel industry; and (c) to determine a way to convey my research findings to the public that celebrates the successes of contemporary Black designers.

METHODS

Online Surveys

The first method of data collection for this research project included an online survey distributed to Black fashion designers across the United states. The survey was 3-fold and was made to encompass 4 different types of participants: 1) Black entrepreneurs who have designed for their own brands; 2) people who have worked for other designers or brands; 3) or people who were a combination of both working for a brand and are entrepreneurs; 4) or are retired Black designers. Questions in the survey ranged from their demographics and salaries, to workplace environments, diversity in the workplace, and their perceptions of the industry and knowledge of other Black designers. There were 23 participants who completed the 33-question survey. The questions were open ended and had a variety of response options such as Likert scales, short sentences, paragraphs and multiple choice. The survey was distributed through snowball sampling in combination with a targeted sample obtained through social media search.

Interviews

The second method of research included in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 16 individuals via phone call or in person. Eleven participants were located in New York City, and 10 of those interviews were in person and one via phone conference. An additional 5 interviews were conducted with designers located outside of New York State via phone call. These additional

interviews were for a targeted sample that was based upon referral from the initial snowball sample. These interviews were semi structured, and the participants were located in nonspecific locations across the United States.

RESULTS

Online Survey Results

A total of 23 participants completed the initial survey. To introduce the results, it is important to take into account the demographics of the participants and how this may affect their responses and the overall results. Seventeen participants identified as female and 6 identified as male. The average ages of those taking the survey were from age 20-29. Participants' ages ranged from age 20 – 59 years old. Most of the participants noted that they identified either as Black, African American, Afro- Caribbean American, or Multiracial. Twelve participants identified as Black, 8 identified as African Americans, 2 participants identified as Afro - Caribbean American and 1 participant identified as Multiracial stating their heritage was “Black, White & Native American”. When asked if they identify as Black fashion designers, 78% of participants identified as Black designers while 4 identified otherwise, and 1 participant preferred not to answer. Those who identified otherwise used terms such as “Black designer (not solely apparel)”, “Black creative director/producer”, “luxury fashion designer”, and “more so as a plus size designer but I am Black so that is always a part of my identifiers”.

The ranges of education from designers were from high school to doctoral level education. The average education level held was a bachelor's degree to which 67% of participants received. Fourteen of the bachelor's degree holders were women and 2 were male. As far as additional instruction for their careers 6 participants mentioned having been trained in patternmaking, menswear, womenswear tailoring, cosmetology, footwear, and various internships. Sixty-five

percent of participants did not have additional instruction or were self-taught. The survey participants each had a variety of levels of industry experience. The average amount of industry experience was between 5-10 years.

The average salary of Black designers who participated in the survey was tied between making \$20,000 to \$49,000 and making \$50,000 to \$100,000 in annual income. With regard to actually making sales, 59% of the entrepreneurs noted that they had occasionally experienced trouble with making sales. Due to the varying sizes of the businesses reflected in the survey the amount of annual sales varied from 420 units to the highest, which was 500,000 units.

Fourteen out of 23 participants were solely focused on their own brand. Four out of 23 participants were designing for a brand and for their own brand. Two out of 23 participants were solely designing for a brand and 3 out of 23 participants were retired from design. The designers who retired provided responses such as “I no longer had the desire to continue” and “I am mainly a design professor now - continue to freelance”. Designers who identified as business owners had business locations in New York, New York; Queens, New York; Brooklyn, New York; Harlem, New York; Atlanta, Georgia; Norcross, Georgia; Los Angeles, California; and Washington, D.C.

I also conducted a thematic analysis to understand more about Black designers’ experiences in the industry. When the designers were asked about various hurdles or challenges when they started their businesses 82% of the entrepreneurs who took the survey said that lack of funds for their business was something that was experienced often.

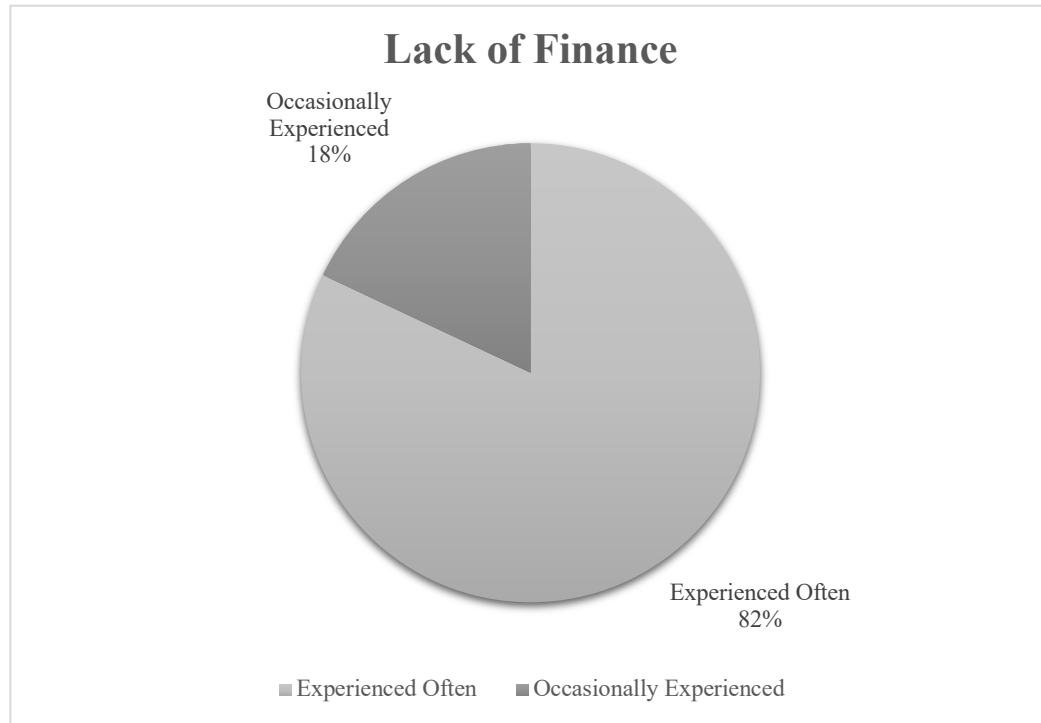


Table 1: Designers who experienced lack of financing

Forty-one % of participants noted that lack of access to certain tools to run their business was “often experienced”, while, 23% of entrepreneur participants noted that they have “never experienced” lack of access to business tools. Forty-one% of designers also noted that they often experienced feeling uneducated or uncertain about business and management strategies. Additionally, 35% mentioned feelings of uncertainty about business management occasionally. When it came to established business goals or a long-term business plan, 71% of designers expressed occasionally having issues with future planning.

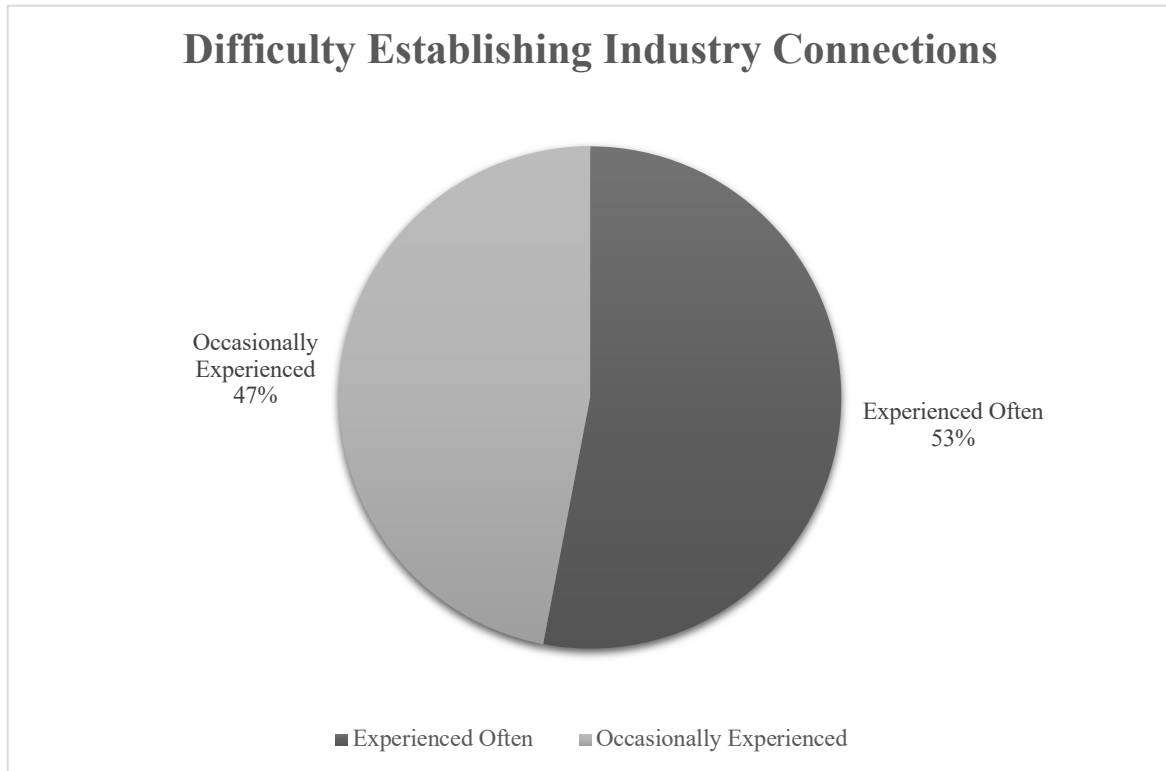


Table 2: Percentage of designers who had difficulty establishing industry connections.

Another challenge mentioned was networking. Fifty-three% of designers noted that they occasionally experienced issues with establishing connections with industry elites. The 47% of designers noted that they experienced challenges to make connections to fashion insiders very often. An average of 47% of entrepreneurs in the survey often experienced issues with to regard the hiring process of employees. Fifty-nine% of entrepreneurs occasionally experienced issues in marketing to their target customers. The target customers mentioned were as follows but not limited to womenswear, menswear, children’s wear, custom design for celebrities and the red carpet, design for professionals, plus size women, LGBTQ, and luxury streetwear. The range of class, age, demographic and race of the target customers were intersectional and diverse. When designers were asked why they picked their target markets, a few of their responses were very interesting. One participant noted “I relate to the struggle of expressing yourself on a budget” and another noted “Because my clothes evoke social awareness and this consumer is all about activism

and change. They want their clothes to represent that.” Sixty-five% of designers used methods to advertise through website or online shopping sites to market to their customer. One hundred% of the designers all used social media platforms to also reach their customer. The usage of advertisements through store fronts, signage, fliers or handouts, and on television was unpopular. Many designers noted that they have never used those methods as a form of advertising to reach their customer. One designer adds that “word of mouth” advertising was important in their marketing of their brand. Fifty-nine% of designers do advertise to their local clientele and, 77% of designers noted that they do collaborate with their local community organizations to promote their brands. A few key strategies were mentioned that they have utilized to successfully promote their brands locally which included “living the lifestyle that you sell”, “pop up shops, and collaborations with other designers”. When asked about lack of support or investment from their community 53% of designers said that they experienced that often. Additionally, 35% experienced feeling a lack of community support occasionally.

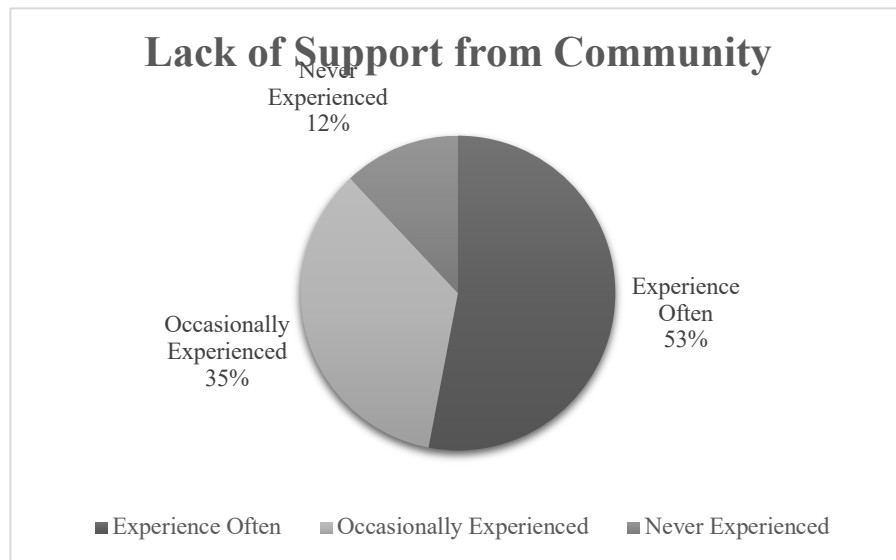


Table 3 : Percentage of designers who experienced lack of support from community

In addition to some of the obstacles I addressed in the survey, the designers were encouraged to provide or list any challenges they may have that I failed to propose in the survey. Some of the

challenges they have mentioned included “Not knowing where to start”, “Lack of self-motivation/confidence”, “Not having the drive to create after work (while working for someone else’s brand)”; “Bullying, poor work/life balance, low pay”, “Lack of capital to grow the company and try new designs”, “Not being mentioned in other conversations, as if our accomplishments aren’t worthy of their attention.”, and lack of “access to materials and facilities is a huge issue”.

Overall, when participants were asked about workplace environments 43% of designers also noted that they have experienced feeling like their talent and work ethic is overlooked. Thirty-nine% of designers expressed having feelings of unequal opportunity to advance in the workplace; additionally, 52% agreed that they had experienced not being taken seriously in the workplace. Forty-three% designers noted they have not seen an awareness for the opportunity of diversity in the workplace.

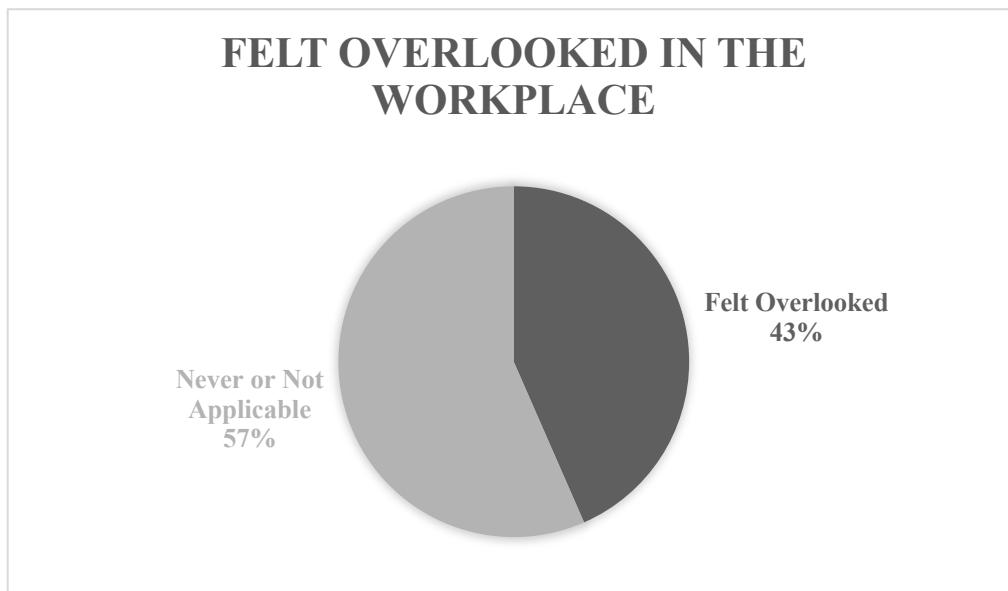


Table 4: Percentage of designers who felt overlooked in the workplace.

According to the survey responses designers mostly experience obstacles related to finance, making sales, business acumen and feeling motivated, and support from their communities. Designers seemed to have an overall optimism about their brands, their long-term goals and their

accomplishments. Many of the designers were making a living off of their target customers which in this particular survey was local customers or celebrity clients. The spike of social media and “word of mouth” marketing was popular amongst the designers for brand advertisements and almost contradicts the notion that one must be in Vogue or Harper’s Bazaar to be an “established” designer.

It is important to have observed the themes that regard the participants’ successes and motivation for starting careers in fashion. Most participants reflected on passion, autonomy, trend study and being inspired by beauty that attracted them to design, while other designers were inspired by generational influences. One participant noted, that “Watching my grandmother sew made me interested in it.” Participants were also asked what their favorite aspect of being a fashion designer was. Many responses were related to concept development, customer satisfaction, and innovative or thrilling successful end products. Designers also had the opportunity to reflect on some of their greatest accomplishments, which varied from the initial securing of a job in the design industry to solo fashion shows, designing for celebrities, having had work featured at the MET gala, having various features in Paris fashion week, and the list continues.

In general, there was a hope and optimism throughout the survey. One designer pointed out that their goal was “To change the world in a positive way through my designs.” Other goals the designers listed in the survey included, “Helping with clothing sustainability by finding a better way to recycle or discard clothing, network as much as I can, and help open doors for upcoming designers and my team”, whilst another designer noted, “To transition into a role that I am truly happy in and to have creative and financial freedom”. An anonymous participant stated that they would “Continue to use my gift to empower the love of fashion and fashion designing - bring my customer's fantasy to life!” Another designer wished to “Be able to afford to manufacturer on a

larger scale and stay relevant to an audience and grow as they grow.” It is interesting that although a few of the answers in the survey were goal oriented around monetary success, but a number of the responses were for the benefit of others and for their own happiness and empowerment. Also, there was a trend toward fame and recognition as designer are on more of an individual self-journey and many were not dependent nor did mention the need to utilize major fashion outlets or to go “mainstream” have been valued as successful.

Interview Results

For the next part of the research, the designers that were interviewed individually gave very in-depth information regarding their personal journeys and experiences in the industry. Due to the length of the in-person interviews normally lasting between 30 minutes to 2 hours much information was ascertained. Based on the themes brought out in the survey results, some of those were brought up in the interviews as well. The themes include: (a) obstacles/dissatisfaction, (financing, race, education, training, access, credibility, target customer, sales in retail, race - in the industry; (b) Black branding, workplace experiences, race effects on career, respect in workplace); (c) accomplishment and satisfaction (triumphs in career); (d) Black designer’s words of wisdom for the future and lastly; (e) the Power to Prevail.

The in-person and phone interviews were a smaller sample than the survey. The ratio of men designers to women was 1:3. The interview sample consisted of 12 females to 4 male designers. Black designers faced many challenges daily, some of which mentioned in this study included a lack of financial capital; being discredited for their experience in the industry by constantly being considered an emerging designer; having to fight to be the only Black designer; having to find sales reps that would take “risks” on a Black designer; and making connections and establishing industry relationships.

The result of the online survey and the interview as a whole identified that there are some apparent satisfactions and dissatisfactions that designers have expressed about their careers. It is necessary to work on the advancement of some of these areas that cause issues for Black designers. Before continuing on to the discussion of these results it is important to acknowledge a crucial result and outcome of the research was the *Black Excellence Fashion that Prevails* exhibition. The exhibition was a way to highlight the talents and individual journeys of Black designers. A main goal of this research was to empower Black designers and the exhibition was a way to bring about more awareness of Black design work to the public in an academic setting.

I believe that a visual exhibit was the best way to demonstrate to the public the depth of talent of Black designers. By interviewing the designers, I had the chance to see the range of their designs and their work experiences. The interviews opened the door for me to inquire about the loaning of their designs to mount the exhibit. It is important that Black designers collaborate and express comradery with each other and the community of Black design work. The exhibition opening reception allowed not only for celebration of their talents but was a way for designers to connect and meet with one another. Through the promotion and affiliation with the university as well as other media, was way to highlight their businesses and showcase their talents!

The Power to Prevail & Black Excellence Fashion: That Prevails Exhibition

Black Excellence brought together 16 inspiring Black designers in an exhibition of elegance, strength, and perseverance. Through fashions that were diverse, all the designers shared a passion to convey Black excellence. The exhibition was organized thematically around the influences of African heritage, elegance, entertainment, and education. Each theme was displayed and expressed respectively in their individual cases.

African Heritage: This exhibition case included ensembles inspired by African roots, traditional prints, design motifs, and silhouettes from a variety of African cultures. The use of various traditional embellishments and textile prints were seen in the contemporary fashion ensembles featured in the heritage case. While the vibrancy and ever-changing creativity varies from designer to designer, they were all inspired differently by African styles. The meanings of heritage and tradition continues to be honored and respected in the Black diasporic community, even when separated by the distance of the Atlantic Ocean.

Black Elegance: This case displayed how Black style has been shaped by sophistication, luxury, and charm. Historically, the Harlem Renaissance and the 1920s Jazz Age dramatically impacted Black fashion and continue to create inspiration for elegance. Movements like these have created a space for Black fashion to become more sophisticated through dress. Designers such as CD Greene and Beulah Cooley, both featured in the Black Elegance case, have also been promoted in Ebony magazine. Ebony readers and fashion designers alike strived to emit refined elegance and sophistication via design work and style techniques. In the contemporary setting, elegance had become prominent in the revamp of urban street wear. Designer, Jerome Lamaar has continued to make huge contributions to glamorous street style and has successfully brought elegance to the contemporary everyday setting by applying luxury and maximalism to everyday lifestyle garments.

Entertainment: Prominent performing artists have contributed considerably to Black culture and American culture as a whole through streetwear, jerseys, oversized shirts, studded pants and overalls, amongst various other trends. There is no doubt that the threads of hip hop could be seen in the seams of Black style. The entertainment industry has influenced Black culture and American culture as a whole through the trends that urban street style of the 90's has to offer.

Designers like Guy Wood understood the importance of fit and sizing and saw a lack of designers catering to rappers with fuller figures. He made a lasting career serving the entertainment business. As hip hop continued to change, those trends in urban Black style reflect that evolution through trend cycles, fit, and design.

Education and Business: Black design scholars such as Dr. Doss, and Ruby Jean Douglas have used fashion as an area of research and creative inquiry. In addition, styles worn in the workplace and educational environments have conveyed professionalism and prominence.

Designer features in Black Excellence: Fashion that Prevails Exhibition

Belania Daley

A native to New York, designer Belania Daley grew up inspired by her Caribbean dancehall roots. Daley explained, “I’ve always liked fashion because my family is Caribbean – Jamaican and fashion plays a big role in the dancehall world. So, it’s like you have to come out with the unique custom best dressed outfit.” (B. Daley, Personal Communication, July 17, 2019). Daley’s affinity for fashion progressed as she began hand sewing at a young age and later learned to sew on a machine in her early teens. From ages 13 to 17, Daley was making and designing clothing. Daley went on to complete an undergraduate degree at FIT in technical design. She said, “The designer has the right idea and we make that raw ideas fit the body perfectly. That is technical design. So, I got into technical designs because fashion design is super competitive. It’s ridiculously competitive in the job field.” (B. Daley, Personal Communication, July 17, 2019). Daley later went on to work in the industry gaining experience at other brands while simultaneously working on her own brand. Daley has described her enthusiasm for Black entrepreneurship by stating, “Why should I not be another Black fashion designer? Because there’s thousands, which there are not? So, with that being said I always go to the fact that there’s not

enough of us doing these things... There's not enough Black fashion designers doing the work and the due diligence to build the foundation for others and I'm willing to do that." (B. Daley, Personal Communication, July 17, 2019). Daley's designs are inspired by the uniqueness and necessity of pairing cohesively dissimilar items. Daley expressed, "You know, you usually wouldn't put a leather with a chiffon. But I think my favorite part of designing is definitely me discovering things that I didn't think would go together. But for some reason my mind draws and is putting it together. It's like I'm relentless" (B. Daley, Personal Communication, July 17, 2019).

Daley's brand is BCD Planet and she focuses on designing bespoke pieces that can be wardrobe staples while adding flair and statement to one's wardrobe. According to Daley, "BCD Planet creates Resort Collectable Collections made in small lots with one of a kind production fabric that is not mass produced. Each collection we do not aim to follow current trends but to expand your wardrobe through all seasons." (bcdplanet.com). As a female entrepreneur and designer, Daley recalled, "What inspired me to start my business was the connection of learning differences and fashion design. So, BCD planet is a direct reflection of dyslexia. With dyslexia you see, and you do things very differently than people who don't have it. So, I wanted to inspire, at least people who are already in the Black community, and people who are not in it to be brave and proud of your learning difference". (B. Daley, Personal Communication, July 17, 2019). Daley aims to inspire and create awareness for those who have dyslexia. "With my work I want to show people, hey, I have dyslexia, I'm a Black female, I'm doing fashion all of this should inspire you. Yes, you should not be ashamed because you learn a little bit differently you should be proud because it's your ability, not your disability. So, my work is here to show others that I'm doing it so you can do it too (B. Daley, Personal Communication, July 17, 2019). Daley has used her brand and her voice to empower those with learning differences or challenges and has used empowerment

to redefine those differences into victory. She leads by example, creating a visual and material dialogue about dyslexia and design within the Black community!

Dr. Tameka Ellington

Dr. Tameka Ellington grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and expressed a passion for art and illustration from a very young age. Ellington remembers drawing since she was able to hold a pencil, around the age of 4. Ellington first developed an interest in drawing for comic books before she discovered her interest in fashion. She explained, “My first career goal was to be an artist working for one of the companies for one of the comic books.” (T. Ellington, Personal Communication, June 19, 2019). Through an 8th grade Home Economics course, Ellington created her first garment. She made a pair of 1970s style pink jungle shorts. Working alongside her teacher Mrs. Jordan, Ellington realized fashion was an area of great interest to her. Ellington recalled, “I love illustrating, and now that I have had this experience with sewing, I loved sewing! So, her [Mrs. Jordan’s] daughter at the time was a student at Kent State University’s fashion program and she brought me a brochure, and ever since the 8th grade I knew that I was going to go to school for fashion at Kent State University and become a designer” (T. Ellington, Personal Communication, June 19, 2019). Ellington went on to achieve the academic and career goals that she set for herself. She explained, “I started off just part-time and eventually finished my Ph.D. and became a full-time professor. It’s amazing being able to do something that you love and to be able to teach people about what it is that you love!” (T. Ellington, Personal Communication, June 19, 2019).

Ellington was able to pave the way while doing what she loved and made history along the way. However, making history does not always come easily. Ellington recalled, “When I first came there [Kent State University] and still today, I am the first and only African American professor

my department has ever had” (T. Ellington, Personal Communication, June 19, 2019). Nonetheless, Dr. Ellington has used the Power to Prevail throughout her life and career and has used literature, research, and experience to advocate and educate regarding the representation of Black designers in the fashion industry. Ellington has used her love for teaching and for the Black community to give back in many ways. All of the design work that Ellington has created as an academic has been focused on African culture. Ellington’s pieces range from inspirations based on the Ghanaian cultures, the Lesotho people and pieces that are inspired by Malian peoples.

Ellington explained the reason why she designs based on African heritage, “to learn more about the beauty in Africa. You know, things that we as African Americans or Black Americans, we don't get to know those things. We are told the very opposite about Africa and what it is. And me doing that research was a way for me to learn about the beauty in Africa and to be able to show other people about the beauty in Africa” (T. Ellington, Personal Communication, June 19, 2019). As a distinguished fashion scholar and designer, Dr. Ellington has added vast knowledge and innovation to her field. “It's almost kind of like you get double the reward because you know, I had my opportunity to work in the industry as a designer and being a designer is very different than teaching students how to make a product” (T. Ellington, Personal Communication, June 19, 2019). In Dr. Ellington’s newly released memoir titled *Make Fear Your Superpower*, she has educated and inspired many by mapping out the details necessary to achieve one’s goals!

Simone Sullivan

Designer Simone Sullivan originally from Miami, Florida has been designing since her time in middle school. Sullivan has made successful strides establishing her designs in New York City. Sullivan is a Parson’s alumna and has used her skillset in fashion to promote Black beauty. Sullivan explained, “I just always see Black women wearing my stuff, and then there’s some things

I design that specifically has a curvy Black woman in mind, which is interesting because for the runway they tend to not have curves” (S. Sullivan, Personal Communication, June 8, 2019). In reflecting on her design process, she stated, “Honestly the best part is when you've made something and someone has it on, and you can see how happy they are to have on what you just made for them” (S. Sullivan, Personal Communication, June 8, 2019). Sullivan organized a successful collection to New York Fashion Week for Fall of 2019; Sullivan’s models graced the runways topless with emphasis on strong pant silhouettes. Featuring all Black models, the collection tastefully represented modern day soul style in the silhouette, fabric, and details of the pants, with bucket hats as accessories. Sullivan is destined for greatness in fashion as her impressive designs continue to empower and give confidence to Black women. The floral top and orange bottom ensemble featured in the exhibit create a flattering silhouette on the figure and was also created by Sullivan in 2019.

Sharufa Rashied-Walker

Sharufa Rashied-Walker is a Howard University alumna who studied sociology, anthropology, and fashion. Originally from Atlanta, Georgia, Walker experienced the opportunity to travel the world as her fashion journey evolved. “It wasn’t until I graduated from Howard and I was in the real-world kind of just figuring out my way that I decided to move to Nice, France and there is where my passion really exploded,” she explained (S. Walker, Personal Communication, July 25, 2019). Walker remembered from her time in France, “Just living the life of freedom and living a life of truly being able to explore, see, touch, feel, and create. I started to travel throughout the world essentially collecting fabrics along my travels and I came back and I started to use these fabrics and a very kind of modern way. Because they were very traditional to the cultures and the societies that I was collecting the fabrics from” (S. Walker, Personal Communication, July 25,

2019). Walker explained the meaning behind her brand name that “Jinaki means self-confident and proud, in Kiswahili. This name has always resonated with me because that’s what I want women to feel when they’re wearing my clothes. You know, to be self-confident, be proud, and ultimately take on the world.” The intersectionality of the identities of women are what resonates with Walker’s designs. Her fashions she explained are, “Something that I wanted to be able to share with all women of all ethnicities, all backgrounds of all shapes all sizes.” (S. Walker, Personal Communication, July 25, 2019) “The brand [Jinaki],” explained Walker, “is all about using textiles, prints, color in a modern way but also with a vintage flair. I’m a lover of the old school, the 50s the 60s and so I know I definitely led with that energy when I first started to design because it was something that as a woman, I love the feeling of feeling dainty and sexy at the same time. Demure at times and it’s the beauty of being a woman really” (S. Walker, Personal Communication, July 25, 2019).

Carl Jones & TJ Walker

Carl Jones and TJ Walker teamed up to launch their iconic fashion brand Cross Colours in 1989. Cross Colours’ vision statement is “Clothing without prejudice.” The statement rings true as the politics facing Black expression in fashion are still occurring in the contemporary market. Their design inspirations were visually communicated by the playful color palette, graphics and screen prints that the brand became known for. According to Jones, “We founded Cross Colours in 1989 and then showed at Magic trade show in Las Vegas in 1990. It was really outstanding because you have to understand that back then the fashion industry was mainly a white business. So, jumping in there with a brand addressing to black culture and establishing it in the market successfully was our biggest achievement ever.” (Kühnl, 2019, para 6.) The brand was catapulted into the limelight with celebrities like Tupac, Will Smith, and TLC, among others, adorned in the

designs. Bobb Brooke noted, “Through their bold designs and graphics Walker and Jones originally set out to craft positive messaging around African American culture and oppression during the Reagan administration, when there was heightened police brutality, a war on drugs, and an education crisis in America. Cross Colours became widely recognized and worn by the hip-hop community” (Brooke, 2019). The brand has also been known for its references to Afrocentrism and for bringing awareness to social justice efforts and issues.

Patrick Kelly

The Mississippi-born fashion designer Patrick Kelly passed away as a result of AIDS-related illness at the age of 35, on January 1, 1990, after starting his label just five years prior. Kelly was one of the most innovative designers of the 1980s. He created a new space for Black design in the Parisian fashion industry. Kelly’s brand was about incorporating fun prints and colors but brought much more than vibrancy to Paris. Through Kelly’s work, many noticed his aim to reclaim and redefine blackface, and to re-appropriate symbols that have histories rooted in racism. These symbols included Black dolls, golliwogs, watermelons and more. Kelly distinctively and intentionally created dialogue between these symbols to defy the norms of Parisian fashion and disrupt the meanings behind these complex historic symbols. to fashion studies scholars Van Dyk Lewis and Keith Fraley have noted, “Kelly offered something different, but not necessarily innovative; it was a pronouncement from his culture, which clashed demonstrably with the traditional, particularly with the traditions of the fashion system, possibly because so few black individuals have risen to prominence.” (Lewis, V. D., & Fraley, K. A., 2015).

In 1988, Kelly became a member of the *Chambre Syndicale du Prêt-à-Porter*, which governs the body of the French ready-to-wear industry. This made Kelly not only the first Black member but allowed him to participate in Paris fashion week. Many of Kelly’s designs were

inspired by his grandmother. Antwan Sargent has stated, “What’s fascinating is that the buttons he placed on the dress were not part of some homage to bygone European design. Instead, they were directly influenced by his grandma in Mississippi, who Kelly grew up watching place unconventional button pairings on clothes. The buttons gave the design a kind of riotous, black Southern femininity that became one of his lasting legacies” (Sargent, 2017, Para 19). Kelly’s legacy has continued to live on as his work still has stood distinctively apart from any designers preceding him.

Dr. Farrell Doss

Dr. Farrell Doss is an industry professional, designer, and educator originally from Chattanooga, Tennessee. “Design has always been a part of my life [...] I love being able to give someone their dream by creating a garment that makes them beautiful and confident. There is no greater reward than using one’s talents to enhance or unlock the power of dress for someone.” (F. Doss, Personal Communication, January 28, 2020). The wool dress on display was part of a juried exhibition sponsored by the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences. As a faculty member in the Department of Design at Radford University, creative scholarly work has been an important professional outlet for Doss. This dress featured in the exhibition showcased a beautifully draped silhouette accentuated by a deep neckline cowl. Working as a custom designer, educator, and scholar, Dr. Doss is grateful to share his dream with many over the years. Doss explained, “I adore helping to prepare the next generation of design professionals.” (F. Doss, Personal Communication, January 28, 2020).

Ruby Jean Douglas

Ms. Ruby Douglas ’72, is a distinguished Cornell alumna, textile expert, and businesswoman who grew up in small town in Danville, Virginia. Douglas knew early on in her

childhood that fashion and textiles were an interest. “When I was in fifth grade,” she remembered, “I said I would like to learn how to sew. So, my mother gave me a sewing machine when I was in sixth grade and for a year, I made aprons. Then after I had my machine for a year, the second year at Christmas time, I made a jumper. My mother gave me fabric and a pattern to make a jumper with big pockets on it. And I sat down and I taught myself how to sew based on the instructions that came in a home sewing pattern.” (R. Douglas, Personal Communication, May 10, 2019).

Douglas pursued her sewing further into high school. “By the time I was in junior high I was making clothes. I believe one summer it was between junior high and high school I made clothes for one of my teachers. That became my summer job making clothing for people.” (R. Douglas, Personal Communication, May 10, 2019) Douglas has always been a diligent academic achiever throughout high school and college. Douglas remembered, “I graduated at the top of my class, but I took home economics. So, I received a full scholarship to Human Ecology. When I got to Human ecology I majored in textiles and clothing. When I started the school, it was called Home Economics and by the time I graduated, I think the next year it was called Human Ecology” (R. Douglas, Personal Communication, May 10, 2019). Douglas went on to become an exemplary student at Cornell, completing her Bachelors in 1972, and her Masters in 1974. “I did my graduate work at Cornell. I developed a curriculum-based on business and marketing. At the time, consumer economics was important. I took courses at the business school and I ended up doing my thesis research with home sewing patterns selection. Looking back now and knowing where I am now, It’s like it all comes together because I went to New York and I worked for a fibers marketing company” (R. Douglas, Personal Communication, May 10, 2019). During her time at Cornell, Douglas embodied what it meant to be an outstanding student to the College of Human Ecology. In 1989 Douglas was the recipient of the Helen Bull Vandervort Alumni Achievement

Award. The award is one of the highest honors presented to alumni of the College of Human Ecology “who have attained outstanding success and distinction in their chosen profession or life's work, and whose accomplishments reflect admirably on, or bring honor to, the College.” Douglas’ awards and achievement at Cornell are evidence of her academic integrity and passion for advancing her own knowledge and the lives of others. After her time at Cornell, Douglas took her expertise into the textile industry in New York City. “I sold fiber, I eventually sold fabric and that’s what I did in New York. During all of this time I parlayed my knowledge as a designer to become a successful salesperson to designers and architects [...] that all the while I continue to sew and to perfect my sewing skills.” (R. Douglas, Personal Communication, May 10, 2019).

Undra Duncan

Undra Duncan, the founder and creative designer for Undra Celeste New York, is a fashion industry professional focusing on contemporary womenswear designs. With over a decade of experience in design, product development, and fashion entrepreneurship, Undra Celeste New York has aimed to redefine workwear for the modern woman. A graduate of Howard University, Duncan has since launched her career working in fashion. “I went to Howard University in Washington D.C. and I studied International business,” said Duncan. “After college I moved to LA for a short while less than two years - and I actually was not working in fashion. I decided to take that time to work in business.” (U. Duncan. Personal Communication, August 12, 2019) After her time in Los Angeles, Duncan moved back to New York: “I moved back to Brooklyn, where I am actually born and raised, to pursue a career in fashion. I spent about 10 years working in product development for some really awesome brands in the industry and in 2010 I kind of made a solid decision that I wanted to be a designer and entrepreneur and that’s pretty much how it started.” (U. Duncan. Personal Communication, August 12, 2019). After her move to New York, Duncan began

to focus on her brand. “I am most inspired by the women,” she said. “Like, I think about her and think about how she how she wants to show up. And I think about how she moves in the world and try to let that be the first thing that starts every collection.” Undra Celeste New York focuses on redefining modern workwear for women, giving women the chance to take control of their professional attire. Duncan stressed the importance of her target customer “Women spend a significant amount of time at work. And how you show (yourself) at work it can make a difference on how you feel at work how you present yourself to others. So, having a workwear brand is just so important because you outfit a woman for the most not necessarily the most important hours of her day but the most significant in terms of how she shows up to the world.” (U. Duncan. Personal Communication, August 12, 2019).

Throughout her career, Duncan has made strides in the industry. For example, she worked with Nike in 2018 to create a shoe for LeBron James. “The project started because of LeBron and his adoration and his praise for his mom. And you know, of course he is like this mega superstar, this mega athlete, but those sentiments ring through Black households everywhere all over the world. And that just to me was really beautiful that the world to see it on that platform and that I was a part of,” said Duncan. She also stated “[...] The collaboration with LeBron James, HFR (Harlem Fashion Row) and Nike, like that was something I’m so proud of. I’m so proud of the relationships I formed with those young ladies that I worked with. I’m so proud of the message that the collaboration put out in the world about collaboration over competition. About the strength of the woman of color, about the strength of the people of color, about the strength of just the everyday women and the things that we do” (U. Duncan. Personal Communication, August 12, 2019).

Jerome Lamaar

Jerome Lamaar is a Bronx, New York native and a multifaceted entrepreneur. He has had an interdisciplinary approach to fashion: “I didn’t care about being recognized as a true designer. I wanted to be recognized as a trend forecaster, a futurist that is using design as a medium.” (J. Lamaar, Personal Communication, July 9, 2019). Lamaar’s career has been about bringing various aspects of industry together through design practice. He has empowered and inspired other designers by example; he stated: “I’m very brave and I use myself almost as a guinea pig to test ideas to and concepts [...] I push spirituality, I push streetwear as I said before, I’m at push whimsical ideas of magic... I pushed all those things” (J. Lamaar, Personal Communication, July 9, 2019).

Lamaar began working in the industry at the age of 15. Throughout his career he has worked with numerous designers, including Russel and Kimora Lee Simmons, founders of Baby Phat and Phat Farm brands, and Chado Ralph Rucci. Lamaar has navigated and prevailed in the industry since a young age: “My career started at age 15 and I was working for the then company called Baby Phat, and so this is the second year around 2001, 2002. It was so cool that it was, [and] I was, so young; I didn’t realize that the company was going to grow so big. That allowed me to basically do whatever I wanted to do while staying within the grounds of a corporate environment.” (J. Lamaar, Personal Communication, July 9, 2019). The position allowed Lamaar to become a jack of all trades, discovering how to do marketing, design, and consultations.

Lamaar explored trend forecasting through top international luxury brands and companies within the fashion industry and beyond. Jerome has had a major impact on his home in the Bronx, giving back to his community in various ways. He has established the Bronx as a major hub for fashion and style trend setting. “I’m from the Bronx,” says Lamaar, “so that alone was something

a hurdle to jump over or an obstacle. They don't want you to win, so they say. So, I took it upon myself to take an internship at Baby Phat, which led me to become the creative director or junior creative director for Baby Phat, which lead me to become a freelance consultant out in the world and work with many clients. So, I'm very grateful!" (J. Lazaar, Personal Communication, July 9, 2019). Jerome coined the term "South Bronx Luxe", and created the 5:31 JEROME brand, known for maximalism and glamorous streetwear. Lazaar said, "I opened a store in the South Bronx. No one thought South Bronx is going to do anything. And you know, now it's the hottest spots in New York City" (J. Lazaar, Personal Communication, July 9, 2019).

"I started my brand and in 2013 because everyone was being so minimal it was a total war thing happening and I was like 'we can't let this be the end of fashion. Let's do something else!' So, with my experience [...] I created 5:31 Jérôme" (J. Lazaar, Personal Communication, July 9, 2019). The brand launch was Lazaar's prelude to the progression of contemporary with streetwear. Lazaar remembered explaining what maximalism and luxury streetwear was at his first show. He was not afraid to let others know: "As of now I believe that my brand did what it needed to do. And it empowered people to think differently. It brought the maximal movement through. No one was doing embellishment; no one was doing embellishment on denim; no one was talking about streetwear. You know, all these avenues I was pushing at the time. I didn't care about being recognized as a true designer. I wanted to be recognized as a trend forecaster, a futurist that is using design as a medium. (J. Lazaar, Personal Communication, July 9, 2019). Lazaar mentions that he will bring his 5:31 JEROME brand back when people are lacking inspiration. He also opened and curated his distinguished 9J, a pop-up concept store in the South Bronx where creatives are welcomed to experience the fluidity of its original space. Having a network of innumerable prominent brands and companies, celebrities, and clientele in the entertainment

industry, Lazaar embodies what it means to prevail. He uses his platform to advocate for the Bronx, for LGBTQ and for the Black community and believes that the fashion industry is changing, “We are at a point in the industry where people are starting to notice African Americans as African American designers. I say that as something that is to be proud of!” (J. Lazaar, Personal Communication, July 9, 2019). Lazaar is optimistic that the contemporary fashion system will allow Black designers to really make their mark.

CD Greene

CD Greene the founder and creative designer for CD Greene New York has been using timeless design elements liaised with exquisite fabric to embrace the epitome of haute couture elegance, luxury, and craft in every design. Greene is an alumnus of the Art Institute of Chicago and moved to New York City to start his journey in fashion. After moving to the city, Greene worked for various brands and designers on Seventh Avenue and later decided that he wanted to start his own collection. He began with private clients and later did a small pilot collection for Bloomingdale’s, another for Henry Bendel, and finally one for Bergdorf Goodman. Greene explained, “At that point I was extremely excited because it’s a phenomenal store and I’ve always wanted to be in that store for as long as I can remember.” (CD Greene, Personal Communication, July 19, 2019). Creating a space for his garments in one of the most prestigious spaces of fashion retail was just the beginning for CD Greene. Having received accolades for his designs, CD Greene’s work retails and displays store front in Bergdorf Goodman.

Greene’s distinctive designs have set him apart, he states “It’s kind of a thing of where I love embellishments. I like to create a fabric that you just can’t buy on a roll. I mean who can do that? When women see my dresses, they can say “that’s CD Greene,” and that’s the ultimate recognition for me. (CD Greene, Personal Communication, July 19, 2019). Greene always knew

that he wanted to do something in clothing design. He began his journey in fashion by being inspired: “I always admired well-dressed women, I always loved movies from the 30s and in the 50s, where women really got dressed up with all the regalia and what have you and it always inspired me to want to do something in the clothing business” (CD Greene, Personal Communication, July 19, 2019). One of his favorite moments in his career was working with Tina Turner for her Wildest Dreams tour. Turner’s team requested CD Greene because of the stage potential of his elaborate and magnificent designs. While he enjoyed designing for those in the entertainment industry, he has since expanded his brand to cater to the modern everyday woman. CDGNY is an emerging second brand, with a lower price point, that will be more accessible to everyday, working women. CDGNY will be launched online and in brick and mortar stores. Greene’s refined designs innately embody the elegance of women through his designs. Greene explained, “I like designing evening wear because it kind of punctuates in a woman’s life. Special occasion in her life, whether it’s a wedding or an anniversary or whatever particular special occasion it is. It’s that dress that she wore she is going to remember, that’s the picture that lasts forever” (CD Greene, Personal Communication, July 19, 2019). CD Greene has glamorously clad royalty, celebrities, and entertainers for decades.

Beulah Cooley

Designer Beulah Cooley has had an affinity for fashion design from a very young age. “I started out as a young girl watching my mom sew and making... I wouldn’t say all our clothes, but she made us our Easter dresses and some school clothes. As I watched her then, I just was so fascinated by her taking a picture in the newspaper or a paper bag and cutting out patterns and making our own patterns to make our clothes,” (B. Cooley, Personal Communication, April 29, 2019).Cooley was already designing and wearing the clothes she fashioned for herself by the

eighth grade. Her interest in fashion grew further as she used her talents in Art Illustration at Oakland University in Michigan. Pursuing her apparel design interest, Ms. Cooley began to acquire industry experiences holding positions in New York City at Bobbie Brooks, Barney's, and Meridian. She would later work on contracting the "Blue Jean Denim Line", retailed at, JC Penney's for another company. Shortly after her time at Bobbie Brooks, her designs took off, and she remembered: "I bought this outfit from one of the department stores in NY and I thought I was so sharp. The outfit was beautiful and when I got dressed, went to church, and I looked around, it was about 6 people that had on my same outfit! I said, I don't like this! This will never happen to me again! (laughter) So, I started making my own clothes then, and kept it up" (B. Cooley, Personal Communication, April 29, 2019). Cooley, a Mississippi native, moved to Detroit, Michigan in 1977 and by the next year she had established her own unique submarket of clientele (beulahcooleycollection.com). Her designs continued to attract interest, and in 1983 she opened "*Beulah's Designer Fashion*," a retail outlet for her designs.

After reaching one of Cooley's many milestones she was determined to have her work displayed in the Ebony Fashion Fair. Mrs. Cooley remembered, "From there, I started sending in designs to Ebony Fashion Fair and 10 years went by. I didn't hear anything back from them. So, I said, well I'm not going to try anymore and that particular year was when they (Ebony Magazine) said "We would like to see your Fall collection!"(B. Cooley, Personal Communication, April 29, 2019) Cooley recalled a phone call with Mrs. Eunice Johnson, who said, "You are a talented designer here... we want to take all 3 of your pieces this year and we want to give you some exposure!" (B. Cooley, Personal Communication, April 29, 2019). Cooley continued, "So, they (Ebony) got the 3 pieces that came out that year" (B. Cooley, Personal Communication, April 29, 2019). Ms. Cooley and Mrs. Johnson's designs even walked down the runway, side by side.

The exposure that Cooley received after being featured in *Ebony* was something like she had never experienced before. She recalled, “I got so much exposure. I had every newspaper in the city interviewing me, I was on all of the TV Channels. The major stations!” She was even bombarded by fans at an Ebony Fashion Fair show. Cooley stated, “When she (the shows MC) called my name and she said, “We have designer Beulah Cooley in the audience!” People rushed me! It was so frightening! People wanted my autograph!” (B. Cooley, Personal Communication, April 29, 2019). Into the 1990s and 2000s Ms. Cooley was still flourishing, having won awards from International Design Competition Sponsored by Canadian Mist Designers of the Future, having work displayed in the Black Art Museum in New York City, winning the Spirit of Detroit Award, having work showcased in the 2002- 2003 "Simply Spectacular" *Ebony Fashion Fair* segment, features in Jet magazine, and pieces from her collection graced the cover of *B.L.A.C* magazine and much more (n.d., www.beulahcooleycollection.com) Cooley’s design business is still flourishing. Cooley explained, “My inspirations come from colors of fabrics and different textures of fabrics. When I see fabric, it could be I walk in the fabric store, and I see fabric. Then I’m inspired by the texture of the fabric and the style.” (B. Cooley, Personal Communication, April 29, 2019). Her “Burlap Collection” is her best seller.—(n.d. www.ispgroupinc.com/beulah_cooley.html). Still designing from Detroit, Cooley has recently expanded her business, opening up a new store in April of 2018, whilst teaching sewing and training classes to local youth (n.d., www.beulahcooleycollection.com). Cooley supports the future of fashion through teaching, which enables her to share the industry knowledge she has gleaned throughout her career.

Misa Hylton

Misa Hylton is originally from Mount Vernon, New York, and has been trendsetting since the early 1990s. She has styled and designed for many prominent figures in the entertainment

business, like Mary J. Blige, Lil Kim, and Missy Elliot, to name a few. According to Rashad Benton of *Billboard*, Hylton “Has become wholly responsible for dressing some of the most influential Hip-Hop artists of the 90s, creating lasting, iconic music moments like Lil Kim's legendary 1999 MTV VMAs performance and Mary J Blige's "Not Gon Cry" music video. She's worked with everyone from Missy Elliott and Foxy Brown for her "I'll Be" music video to 50 Cent, Fat Joe, Remy Ma, Faith Evans, Terrence Howard and LaLa Anthony” (Benton, Rashad, 2017, Para 10). Hylton’s style, taste, and legacy have impacted many artists as they develop their personas and further convey their image to their fans. Hylton continues to shape the future of fashion and launched her Misa Hylton Fashion Academy (MHFA) in 2012. Hylton stated in an interview with *Billboard* that “It all started as an idea to give back to my styling community. As a mentor, mother, and teacher at heart I saw there was a void. An exciting career as a "stylist" is available these days, but no one is really preparing and passing down the knowledge and skill set needed to turn this opportunity into a reality” (Benton, Rashad, 2017, Para 10).

Guy and Sharene Wood

Guy and Sharene Wood are both native New Yorkers, born and raised in Harlem. They have created success in their business partnership by designing and dressing some of the most important Black entertainers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Their businesses include 5001 Flavors and Harlem Haberdashery, which is an award-winning boutique and the retail expression of 5001 Flavors. They have created a legacy in the apparel and entertainment industries and within Harlem. They have a reputable client list, which speaks volumes about their design aesthetic, hospitality, vision, expertise, and Power to Prevail. Guy Wood explained, “When I started the business I gravitated towards the bigger guy. Because I knew they had the same problem that I had. It was nothing in the marketplace for them. So, my first few customers, was big “this”, huge

“that”, rappers you know. Rappers this big or whatever. I went after all the bigger guys. The Heavy D’s, the Prince Marky D, then Biggie and those were my, that was my core base and then I started making stuff for the masses” (G. Wood, Personal Communication, July 12, 2019). Sharene Wood explained, “So, it for me is more about like everyone elevating their craft. From a beginning standpoint to like an ending standpoint of success and brand building and superstardom and recognition. So that’s what’s important to me is helping people kind of live their dreams while we’re living out our dreams” (S. Wood, Personal Communication, July 12, 2019).

Known as the “First Family of Harlem” Guy and Sharene Wood have been able to pass down their legacy with the creation of other multiple businesses with their children. According to Guy Wood, “For me it was more or less building a legacy, building a brand that can withstand the test of time and then bring my family into it. Now raising my children, now they all have their own personal lines...All that said, I really do love dressing my clients and bringing them to life” (G. Wood Personal Communication, July 12, 2019). To that end Sharene Wood stated, “It is about creating that transferable business legacy, you know building a brand and allowing your family and future generations to elevate themselves, and educate themselves about a new industry and create opportunities for their brands and watch one idea that Guy and I had to expand into, it kind of replicates and duplicates itself. And now having been in business for 28 years working on three different brands and to see that expanded into literally 10 different brands for other people is exciting. Because it opens up the door to entrepreneurship that leads into creativity that leads into something that’s kind of everlasting” (S.Wood, Personal Communication, July 12, 2019).

Not only are the Woods passing down success generationally, but they also enjoy giving back to their community. The Woods generously share their success with others in many ways, whether supporting NYC Hospitals in Harlem or holding annual events to benefit non-profits like

the Boys and Girls club of Harlem and Food Bank New York. Sharene Wood supports Y.E.S (Young Executives for Success) as a volunteer on the fundraising branch of Dress for Success Worldwide along with serving on the board of Black Women for Black Girls. Guy and Sharene have been honored by Council Member Inez E. Dickens as recipients of the Sylvia & Herbert Wood Scholarship award. Guy Wood has sat on panels for Schomburg Center for Black research and Dream Leapers with Harriet Cole. They are role models for many aspiring fashion entrepreneurs as they continue history-making strides in the fashion industry and in the Black community.

DISCUSSION

Obstacles & Dissatisfactions

The theme of obstacles branched into subgenres that included items such as the recognition and respect, having to work harder than others, lack of tools and financing and competitiveness in the job field for fashion design amongst Black designers. In regard to hard work, resiliency and perseverance, the fashion industry is a challenge for most designers regardless of race. However, for Black designers because of skin tone sometimes unfortunately there are more challenges. Designer Jaimi Evans stated, “The biggest obstacle to me is asserting yourself in an industry that does not think you should be there” (J. Evans, Personal Communication, July 27, 2019). Unfortunately, just because of the political history of the United States and the fashion system that is un-reliantly capitalistic, there has been an uneven playing field and unfair disadvantage for Black designers.

Designer Ruby Douglas has stated, “The playing field is still not level, in all of our professions” (R. Douglas, Personal Communication, May 10, 2019). This unfair advantage includes lack of funding. To that end, Dr. Tameka Ellington explained, “I believe why Black designers are not in main magazines is because there are a lot of political things involved in that.

Also, there is a lot of financial backing that has to happen and unfortunately, Black designers don't get the same financial backing as a lot of White designers...We just don't get the same level of support that others get. We have to fight. For everything we get" (T. Ellington, Personal Communication, June 19, 2019). With regard to lack of financing for designers, Joy Douglas stated, "The main one which is finances. The industry is very difficult for someone that doesn't come from a very wealthy background. Any industry is difficult like that, but the fashion industry especially has created a wall" (J. Douglas, Personal Communication, November 3, 2018).

As mentioned, there are a variety of obstacles that have made the playing field difficult to navigate in business and in fashion. The designers also shared their thoughts on the topic of work ethic. Designer Jaimi Evans has stated "There is a push to go twice as hard to get half of the credit for any and everything that you do" (J. Evans, Personal Communication, July 27, 2019). Designer Guy Wood also advised "It's going to be many times that you don't get paid or you're going to work so many hours that it doesn't make sense" (G. Wood, Personal Communication, July 12, 2019). But the fast pace of the industry and all the hard work that comes along with it, there is bound to be growth. Designer CD Greene mentioned that "Growing pains aren't necessarily an obstacle. But it is something that you are going to face in your business at some point in that you're growing. You're expanding, and you're trying to be in the right doors and have the right product" (CD Greene, Personal Communication, July 19, 2019). Designers who have been more inclined to do custom work have also mentioned that balancing supply and demand as a new entrepreneur can be a challenge. For those who have worked for a brand in a workplace, the challenges could still be difficult even though one is a hard worker. Designer Jaimi Evans stated "In the workplace being that I'm a sales and design assistant, I'm trying to find my path, and to do it is hard, when they don't think that you are qualified. So how do I show someone that I am qualified when you don't

give me the opportunity? I mean, it is discouraging at times” (J. Evans, Personal Communication, July, 27, 2019). Designers may face the challenge in having to prove their talents and ability for leadership, although their efforts may be overlooked, ignored, and they may have a lack of opportunity.

It could be assumed that with hard work would come respect but in the fashion industry for designers of color respect is not always achieved. Designer Undra Duncan also noted, “I can’t answer why but it’s the mentality that designers of color are always emerging. When are we just designers? They always look at it as an emerging brand even though I have my second business. I have 15 years of industry experience. I’m just like a designer at this point, but they look at you as emerging. When you say emerging, you think oh it’s a risk, but then you see them taking risks on other brands” (U. Duncan. Personal Communication, August 12, 2019). If Black designers are facing a lack of financing and are not receiving as many opportunities or are not allowed the space to thrive and are viewed a risky business partners, then it is no surprise that these designers are not receiving recognition for their talents from the industry.

Dr. Tameka Ellington mentioned, “There is still so much going on in regard to the stereotypes]and I truly believe that people that are non-African are afraid to allow Africans to come into the mix because they are afraid of the competition. And so, they keep trying to make it difficult for us. and keep trying to pacify us” (T. Ellington, Personal Communication, June 19, 2019). With regard to the set-up of the uneven playing field even creativity has been at stake. Designer Joy Douglas has stated, “It is almost as if there is a hinderance of creativity with having a European design influence. That also may be a hinderance to some African American designers and they may not want to feel that they have to design to European standards” (J. Douglas, Personal Communication, November 3, 2018). Black designers have been limited to what type of creativity

is produced, not only within corporations, and they have been expected to produce designs according to prescribed ideals if their target customers were not Black or were looking for a certain aesthetic.

While issues of politics and corporate environments have had their own set of challenges there are also challenges maintaining one's space or even entering the industry. Due to the competitive nature of the industry establishing rapport can be difficult. Belania Daley has noted that "fashion design is super competitive. It's ridiculously competitive in the job field. Instability as far as a fashion designer in corporate is blinding. So, I went for a technical design job because stability was there, the pay was great, and it was in high demand." (B. Daley, Personal Communication, July 17, 2019). In addition to the competition one designer noted, "That was one of the main things I started to fall out of love with our industry is that there is this sense of competition...I don't work well in that environment; I prefer to work with people and be in a team environment." The competitiveness of the fashion industry has made it difficult for not only designers of color but for all designers. Still, the added competition has made it more tough for Black designers who throughout history have faced discrimination in multiple fields based on appearance.

Additionally, Black female designers have faced a number of challenges themselves mainly due to lack of respect and being overlooked although many have tremendous talent. Rachel Powell has stated, "Just because the industry does target the women demographic, once you get into the work force and once you see what is going on behind the scenes, you see that it is a lot of men that make up the top positions of power at these big companies or traditional fashion houses" (R. Powell, Personal Communication, October 21, 2018.) Designer Misa Hylton noted "There is a push to work harder as an African American designer and also as a female designer. It's the same

story we have heard many times. However, things are changing, and I see it. We have more opportunities and a voice now, something that we did not have in the past.” (M. Hylton, Personal Communication, December 17, 2019). Female designers experience being entrapped in a double barrier of being Black and female, which has caused them limited exposure and lack of recognition and promotion in the workplace as well as in the general fashion industry. The opportunity for the voice and strength for female Black designers is very important, as the industry has markets that cater to not only women of color but to women that are shaped differently than “traditional” or the “standard” body types.

Accomplishments & Satisfaction

Although there are a lot of implications of working in the industry as a Black designer, there is a lot of satisfaction that comes along with perseverance. Some of the satisfaction comes from connecting with a certain client or another designer, establishing a space in retail, and even the joy from concept development and the design process. Designer CD Greene has stated, “I think one of my most favorite things particularly working for yourself, is that you can come up with an idea you can sketch it and it is this vision” (CD Greene, Personal Communication, July 19, 2019). Many designers noted that their main passion of their jobs was affiliated with the design process, product and concept development, as well as having satisfied their customers.

Sharene Wood stated that the satisfaction of her job was “More about everyone elevating their craft. From a beginning standpoint to an ending standpoint of success and brand building and superstardom and recognition. So that is what is important to me is helping people kind of live their dreams while we’re living out our dreams” (S. Wood, Personal Communication, July 12, 2019). Designer Guy Wood stated, “For me it was more or less building a legacy, building a brand that can withstand the test of time and then bring my family into it. Now raising my

children, they all have their own personal lines.... So, I mean, that is great that I can transfer education and wealth to my family. That's all I've ever really wanted to do" (G. Wood, Personal Communication, July 12, 2019). Especially for designers who are able to benefit their loved ones and to pass on the legacy of their brands, the efforts of Black design work, leadership, and fashions prevail on a continuum.

Designers have also expressed the availability of marketing through social media as giving them a way reach their audiences in new ways. Designer Rachel Powell stated "Through the use of Instagram and Twitter, just because of its visual content, I feel that people will respond to that more. But then also being able to partner with people who have a larger social media presence who are for the cause of advancing Black voices" (R. Powell, Personal Communication, October 21, 2018). As mentioned, the space and opportunity for Black designers to market on their own terms is greater than ever before due to the use of social media. With Black designers who continue to flourish in the contemporary space, they were gracious enough to share some of their words of wisdom for upcoming generation of Black fashion designers.

Words of Wisdom

Understanding our past is a way to guide and propel our future and shared knowledge is invaluable if used correctly. Designers shared just a few words that were crucial to the future of the industry and very telling of the optimism many of them share. Designer CD Greene advised, "Just be true to yourself and what you believe in. No matter what anybody else told you. Believe in yourself do your homework and make sure that you know what you're doing, and that you are very specific in terms of your product quality and your fit. Savor every moment. It's a great life if you can sustain yourself, designing and doing something that you love. I enjoy coming to my showroom every day and I feel so blessed" (CD Greene, Personal Communication, July 19, 2019).

Many designers in the study loved their jobs as designers and many have also referenced knowledge and educating oneself in the field of fashion. Knowledge of the industry will breed ample opportunity for prospective designers to immerse themselves in the industry.

Designer Jerome Lamaar noted, “My insight is to basically let them know that we are all in this together. Stay together, create together, build together. Because that’s the only way that they will respect us. There is power in numbers. You know, we are not in competition with one another, we are all here together” (J. Lamaar, Personal Communication, July 9, 2019). It is important that Black designers establish a community of support. Designer Undra Duncan spoke to the importance of being hands on in the industry and stated “Everybody would love to work for the big brands. But sometimes it’s really good to work for a smaller brand. As opposed to working for a huge international brand where there’s so many layers between an intern and the CEO” (U. Duncan. Personal Communication, August 12, 2019). Overall, the words of wisdom were an encouraging insight in what it will take to succeed and prevail in the fashion industry.

Power to Prevail

The Power to Prevail is a crucial overarching theme that connects many of the designer’s journeys together through their intersectional challenges and victories. Themes of perseverance, resiliency and tenacity is what all the stories have had in common and the agility to accept failure until one succeeds. Designer Belania Daley “If you fail, you have to be willing to be courageous enough to get back up and do it again. And while you’re doing it again, find more information and add it again. It’s like a trial and error for the Black underground designers” (B. Daley, Personal Communication, July 17, 2019). Designer Undra Duncan shared “I’m proud of the staying power that I’ve had. My brand is five years old and I have consistently been able to put up collections...because this is not an easy thing. Just to be here. To show up. To be inspired. To go

another day and do this when it's such a hard thing to do. So, I'm really proud" (U. Duncan. Personal Communication, August 12, 2019). Being a designer requires patience and the ability to persevere when outcomes are unexpected or out of control. Staying power in the field of fashion has been a testament to the Power to Prevail and the continued strength of Black entrepreneurs.

Black designers have been very courageous and motivated and have continued their influence in the industry. Designer Belania Daley noted, "There's not enough Black fashion designers doing the work and the due diligence to build the foundation for others. And I'm willing to do that. Even if I don't become a Yeezy or a Fenty, it's okay. I want to build the foundation for my niche and my section of fashion design" (B. Daley, Personal Communication, July 17, 2019) Designers have been sticking true to their roots and have allowed their work and talent to speak on all fronts. There has been undeniably a strong prominence of Black design influence on the industry that will continue to work its way to the forefront. Designer Jerome Lamaar stated "I think we are at a point in the industry where people are starting to notice African Americans as African American designers. I say that as something that is to be proud of. Culture comes from us... So, I'm so grateful to be a part of that, now we can actually say that we are here" (J. Lamaar, Personal Communication, July 9, 2019). To that end, Designer Misa Hylton has noted "Now that we are able to have an open conversation about it (diversity), we are able to demand change in the industry" (M. Hylton, Personal Communication, December 17, 2019). Black designers have noticed the presence of each other and their talents and how their talent has affected their power and influence on the fashion industry.

In light of the results of the online survey and the interviews as a whole there were apparent satisfactions and dissatisfactions as well as a few obstacles and accomplishment that Black designers have noted. The question did arise in regard to the differences between the challenges

Black designers face versus all other designers who also work diligently in a cutthroat industry of fashion. However, looking to the third theme of the Critical Race theory is “Social Construction,” in which Law researchers and critics, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, specifically spoke to the relationships between races. Delgado and Stefancic noted “[E]ach disfavored group in this country has been racialized in its own individual way and according to the needs of the majority group in particular times in its history (Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J, 2001, Pg. 69). This recognized that every minority faces different types of marginalization and limitations. Their theory dismantles the idea that one can simply belittle the experiences that African American designers have faced just because the industry has been difficult for everyone.

One of those main areas most important to discuss is race based discrimination. Sharufa Walker stated, “I know personally from my myself being a woman of African descent journeying in this world of fashion, I’ve been approached from many people who had an expectation of how I should design, what I should be designing, who I should be designing for. And they really start to immediately from the time they see you, they pigeonhole you into what you’re capable of.” (S. Walker, Personal Communication, July 25, 2019). To that end Walker also added “When you start to go into different relationships and you start to see how people immediately have a perception of you before you even walk through the door, just based off of my name, because they’re like oh I have a meeting with Sharufa, what’s this all about? so I think that as an industry fashion can do better!”(S. Walker, Personal Communication, July 25, 2019) Referring back to the Injustice of Appearance framework this designer had expressed a form of discrimination based on looks, how the brand is presented, and what capabilities she is “supposed” to be allowed. While the discrimination may or may not be overlooked by the perpetrators, the effects are still undeniably there. Injustices of appearance throughout history have typically resulted in less opportunity for

the Black community and access to things like financing, education, and respect for business acumen.

A few of the designers expressed the feelings of marginalization due to gender. Black female designers are still facing the nuances of having to work hard for respect. The respect that male counterparts naturally obtain due to gender is something that should be confronted in the fashion industry. Designer Misa Hylton mentioned that although she has obtained prestigious positions in the industry that talent is what always sets her up for success. Now that women are in some of the top positions in fashion brands, it is wise to use that power to hire more Black fashion designers to positions of power and affluence.

Changes in business can be made at the top levels, which may be a fairly effective way to promote Black diversity within the fashion workplaces. However, how do the fashion influences of hierarchy affect underground Black designers? A participant from the interviews, Belania Daley has mentioned, “It’s like a trial and error for the Black underground designers. A lot of them are too afraid to do that trial and error journey and then now we’re in a stage of millennial entrepreneur designers - who are like “You know what I got this formula for myself. I can look at others and try to do it their way,” but you can’t really do that. You kind of have to figure out your own formula” (B. Daley, Personal Communication, July 17, 2019). Underground Black have designers fallen into this system of hierarchies and have faced many challenges that other designers may not, albeit they may be very successful and profiting from talent and targeting their customers. Depending on their long-term goals, some designers would like more prominence while others would like to maintain their low profile. So how is an underground designer who would like to make it into “mainstream” fashion, with low financial backing no easy access to fashion’s “gate keepers”? The second premise of the Critical Race theory is sometimes called “intersect convergence.” Delgado

and Stefancic have described as “[R]acism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class people (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it” (Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J., 2001, Pg. 7). It seems as if having constructs of discrimination within the hierarchy of fashion allow some to enjoy pleasure of privilege and job security. It is quite possible that these advances may exist to capitalize on the culture and will utilize the voices of Black designers to save face after exhausting instances of cultural nuance.

Unfortunately, the contemporary fashion industry and a few luxury brands have continued to express blatant, if not explicit, racism. In 2019 alone, Dolce & Gabbana, Gucci, Prada, and many more brands have upset the Black community and their allies through racist imagery and iconography used in their clothing or promotion, such as the usage of Black face, or having made visual racial slurs and much more. Dapper Dan has been working Gucci to create initiatives and a strategic plan to promote diversity, so that an error should not occur again in the future.

Another previously mentioned encounter happened in October of 2019. This was an example of the misuse of hierarchal power that was exposed by Kerby Jean Raymond, the creative designer of Pyer Moss who detailed his encounter with Business of Fashion (BOF) and its founder Imran Amed. Raymond wrote a note to his Instagram titled “Business of Fashion 500 is now 499” which explained the situation in depth.

Raymond was invited by BOF to do a salon talk by himself and was eager to have the opportunity. He had previously expressed his frustrations about grouped panels regarding diversity but had been unable to individualize his thoughts by being grouped into the industries “Blackness”. Prior to his salon talk, Raymond detailed a lot of his inspirations and methods he uses to reach the Black community through fashion to the editors of BOF. However, once receiving this information BOF canceled his salon talk and extended Raymond an invitation to the BOF Gala instead.

Raymond wrote in his note “Last night, against my better judgment I went to the BOF 500 gala.” (Raymond, K. 2019, para 2).

Once Raymond arrived at the gala, he noticed similarities of the theme of the event to things that he told to BOF. He noticed at the event that the theme was diversity and that there was a Black choir performing but that the audience and those who were being honored at the event were not Black. Raymond reflected, “To have your brain picked for months, be told that your talk at the “Salon” and work inspired this whole thing, and then be excluded in favor of big brands who cut the check is insulting. Pay attention to the brands on the covers” (Raymond, K. 2019, para 17).

Raymond understood that the business did use him to their advantage. He later stated, “Was the intent all along to milk people like me for insight into our community, repackage it and resell it back to larger corporations with no intent of making real change? Was the choir the change?” Overall, this situation has revealed social injustice and disregard for Black designers and the culture of the Black community.

This instance was proof that hierarchies have manipulated Black designers to gain access to culture and heritage for their own benefit. Contemporary issues in regard to research have been very important. It is shameful that these incidents did happen however it is beneficial that wrongdoings have been called out. These public innuendos are where change can be made, and these lead to more progress and empowerment towards Black diversity in the fashion industry. Raymond’s note to the public addressing the injustice has shown that the Power to Prevail is has been prominent amongst Black designers.

There has been progress made for Black designers in the industry with Rihanna’s Fenty brand, which was the first Black owned and female led luxury brand in the Moët Hennessey – Louis Vuitton (LVMH) conglomerate. Designer Christopher John Rogers was the 2019 Recipient

of CVFF (Council of Fashion Designers of America/Vogue Fashion Fund). Black designers have been are very inspired to continue the movement of Black empowerment and representation in the in the industry and that was evident in the tones of responses from the survey and interviews from this study.

Solutions

An anonymous designer from the survey offered a number of solutions: “Black designers need mentorship, collaboration opportunities with large brands and financing.” The very apparent obstacles that were found in the results of this study were necessary to work on the advancement for the betterment of Black designers. One of the solutions included the reevaluation of the hierarchy structures in the fashion system to allow more space for designers of color in positions of creative authority. If society is to allow this there must first be recognized the flaws in the thinking and organization of the current system. Kaiser wrote that racial re-articulation permitted a way of rethinking, revising, and reclaiming race away from stereotypical representations (Kaiser, 2012, p.79). Whilst Collins has also provided a way to reevaluate race, class and gender that could be conducive to change in America. Collins has argued, “Our task is immense. We must first recognize race, class and gender as interlocking categories of analysis that together cultivate profound differences in our personal biographies. But then we must transcend those very differences by reconceptualizing race, class and gender in order to create new categories of connection” (Collins, 1996, p.27). The reconceptualization of race and its facets would help tremendously in the fashion industry, but the incentive for people to follow suit would be the more difficult part as people’s viewpoints regarding race are usually deep rooted.

The need for the reconstructions in the industry are important to the progress that will be made in the future as well as progress from the past in regard to Black diversity. Designer Simone

Sullivan proposed, “We have to work harder Black people in general have to work harder for everything. It’s really annoying because I actually had a conversation with someone about this recently. About how we feel about integration with Black people and White people being together and someone was like saying how we should be separated again. And it’s an interesting concept...we make progress by being integrated and not being discriminated against. I think the issue is that we became integrated before we were seen as equals, so we still were looked upon as lower class citizens” (S. Sullivan, Personal Communication, June 8, 2019). I argue for the advancement of integration but also for the strength of the alliance within the community of Black fashion designers.

To the community of Black fashion designers in the United States there should be better terms of unity or comradery. This would be difficult to achieve on a national scale but could start small in their respective creative communities. I do not agree that actions, creativity and the overall perspectives of Black designers should be regulated, but to have more of a cohesive unforced structure that could promote and educate young designers to enter, operate, and maintain a force in the industry might be helpful at some point. Black designers have faced angst throughout history, and they can use the Power to Prevail could propel new changes to the industry that will create more spaces that are solely for Black empowerment. However, to get to this undertaking the consumer market and all facets of creative design must first readily be accepting to incorporate a movement in that direction. Society cannot continue to ignore cultural injustice or the looming process of transition into the future systems of apparel commerce that may happen as the fashion systems have evolved rapidly. Optimistically, there is hope that fashion will move towards the implementation of formats for more equality and diversity into its systems so that the legacy of the Power to Prevail and fashions that prevail will live on!

CONCLUSION

Overall, Black fashion designers have traversed a long way looking back to the earliest instances of design where Elizabeth Keckley was restricted in creativity but still persevered when given the opportunity to prevail. By recognizing the designers that pioneered and paved the way for existing designers currently working in the industry, I have tried to show the advancement and openness that has given contemporary designers the opportunity to own their own companies, design with the aesthetic that they wish and to the target market that they admire. Although the contemporary designer may have faced pressure to design to an ever-demanding industries ideal, it is important to hold fast to one's originality as that is what will breed creative liberation, pushing past those boundaries, boxes, and labels that the industry has for Black apparel designers.

In aims to continue the growth and empowerment of Black designers, hopefully the outcome of this study as well as the conceptual framework of the Power to Prevail has provided just a glimpse of insight into the tremendous talents and strength that are stored within a just a portion of Black fashion designers across North America. Due to the tenacity, resilience and momentum to create and represent Black design work, I have argued that the designers featured in this study are all influenced by the Power to Prevail. I believe that Black style and Black influence in the fashion industry will live on.

Future Research

Having heard Black designers share their perspectives of the industry and understand the components that they have battled or wished to change were the aspects that Black designers and society as a whole can all collaboratively work together to fix. To this end, camaraderie for Black apparel designers can be created and a new dynamic and a space for Black success can be presented in the apparel industry. All of these very significant findings and the Power to Prevail conceptual

framework used in this study may hopefully fuel or intrigue other academic scholarship towards the inquiry for knowledge cultural studies or other topics in fashion, the arts, and craftsmanship.

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Approval Date: October 10, 2018
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