

# Size zero high-end ethnic: Cultural production and the reproduction of culture in fashion modeling

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## Abstract

The fashion modeling industry has long been criticized for using excessively thin and exclusively Anglo-looking models in advertising and runway shows. How do fashion producers make decisions to hire models, and why is the fashion model aesthetic defined so narrowly? Based on participant observation and interviews with modeling agents and clients in New York and London, the current study explains how producers in the modeling industry weigh their decisions on two publicly polemical issues: slenderness and racial exclusion. As workers in cultural production, agents and clients face intense market uncertainty when selecting models. In the absence of objective standards, they rely on conventions, imitation, and stereotypes to guide their decisions. Producers hire fashion models to articulate market-specific versions of femininity. In the commercial market, they emphasize demographics, racial inclusion, sex appeal and attainable beauty; in the high-end editorial market, they seek distinction, sexual unavailability and rarefied beauty. As cultural producers, agents and clients ultimately reproduce culture by fashioning femininity along race and class lines. © 2009 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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In the early spring of 2007, on a cloudy English afternoon, a group of protesters, mostly women, gathered outside the gates of London's Natural History Museum on Cromwell Road. They shouted and marched and braved the cold in the name of justice at a most unjust time of year in London: Fashion Week. Any-Body.Org, Susie Orbach's brainchild for positive body image, organized its first protest with the aim of sending a message to British designers, magazine editors, and modeling agents. Their problem with Fashion Week—that month-long international showcase of designer collections passing through New York, London, Paris and terminating in Milan—was not with fashion per se, but with the fashion models. “WE WANT BODY DIVERSITY ‘IN’ FASHION,” read one protest sign. “FREE WOMEN FROM BODY

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HATRED. . . *strut body variety on the catwalk,*” read another. The following show season, across the Atlantic, another type of diversity was being discussed as noticeably absent: “Where have all the black models gone?” Such was the opening question put to a sold-out panel discussion at the New York Public Library titled “Out of Fashion: The Absence of Color,” headed by industry leaders there to address their perceived decline of models of color on the catwalk.

Somewhere along the line, these critics claim, fashion models have gone from idyllic to grossly unrealistic, from fantasy to nightmare, from playful icons to painful jabs at the rest of us. They are now so unrepresentative of the everyday woman that they are offensive. They are far too slender, wearing “size zero” and having dangerously low Body Mass Indexes, a problem that stirred international attention after the anorexia-related deaths of two Latin American models over the course of two show seasons (Phillips, 2007). They are far too white, nearly exclusively Anglo-looking, a complaint echoed by supermodel Naomi Campbell and designer Dame Vivienne Westwood, both of whom raised charges of industry-wide racism (Feitelberg, 2007; Pilkington, 2007).

The call for diversity on the catwalk has not accomplished much. The same line-ups of models from spring 2006 were again seen on the catwalks in spring 2007, this, despite a flood of media coverage of the debates, a ban in Madrid of models with an excessively low BMI, and the threat of monthly rallies to pressure the Council for Fashion Designers of America to acknowledge and fight racial discrimination (Pilkington, 2007). In its July 2008 issue, *Italian Vogue* featured only black models throughout its pages in conspicuous reaction to the media criticism, but on the whole, fashion magazines continue to under-represent minorities. Critics point to the persistence of excessively thin and exclusively white models as evidence of sexist and racist production practices in fashion (Nikkhah, 2007; Nussbaum, 2007). As feminist and intersectionality theorists have long argued, gender and race are powerful and connected social forces in cultural representation, reflected in media as diverse as fashion advertisements and political campaigns (Bordo, 1993; Dyer, 1993; Hill Collins, 2004; Hooks, 1992; Stoler, 1989; Williams, 1989). While sociologists recognize the salience of gender and race in cultural representations of women, less understood are those processes of cultural production through which producers’ ideas of gender and race intersect and take shape in the finished product, the model “look.” To this end, we should ask, how do cultural ideas of race and femininity inform production practices in the fashion modeling market?

This article explains how producers in the modeling industry weigh their decisions on two analytically liked issues, body types and racial exclusion, both of which stem from a central underlying construct: the narrow definition of femininity in white terms. As part of a 30-month-long ethnography, I observed the Fashion Week catwalk circuit from New York to London and interviewed modeling agents, known as “bookers,” and their clients. I wanted to know how producers talk about contested definitions of femininity, what their own roles are in defining femininity, and how they make potentially unpopular decisions to hire—or overlook—certain models. What I found was only a lot of empathy with Any-Body.Org and Naomi Campbell, but also a lot of fear. Bookers and clients face intense uncertainty as they look for the right models in the high-end segment of the fashion market, where the stakes of impressing elite consumer tastes are high. Under pressures of uncertainty, producers defer to conventions, they rely on racial stereotypes, and in the end, they reproduce distorted representations of women.

Bringing an intersectional lens to the field of cultural production, this article analyzes fashion modeling as a culture industry in which bookers and clients “size up” fashion models with a stratified field of consumers in mind. I argue that producers create different visions of femininity based on distinctions they perceive among social classes of consumers. Producers envision a

racially diverse and heteronormatively attractive look when catering to a middle-class audience, but they construct an “edgy” look of white sexual unavailability to be consistent with what they assume are elite tastes of other producers.

I begin with an overview of existing theories of fashion as both a site to understand cultural meanings and a site where culture is produced. Next, I describe my research sites and present ethnographic and interview data on the structure of the modeling market. I analyze how producers in the commercial sector of the market talk about women’s bodies in terms of size and racial diversity, and compare these findings to the editorial sector of the market. Intersecting notions of race and sexuality, I argue, are institutionalized through the routines of production, but this happens in two very different ways depending on producers’ location in the market and their exposure to uncertainty. I conclude with an analysis of how class mediates race and femininity in this market as cultural producers ultimately reproduce culture.

## 1. Theories of cultural representation

Advertisers and designers hire models for their “look,” and bookers broker the trade. A look refers to a model’s unique appearance and personality that appeals to a particular client at a particular time and depending on the product being sold. Beyond basic attractiveness and loose height and size criteria (typically at least 5’9” and dress size 0–6), a model’s look is sized up as a matter of personal tastes and evaluations of her physical beauty (Mears and Finlay, 2005).<sup>1</sup> This look has attracted considerable cultural analysis in feminist and intersectional theory, as images of models promote and disseminate ideas about how women *should* look. If gender is a matter of active “doing,” and not mere passive being (West and Zimmerman, 1987), then modeling is the professionalization of a certain type of gender performance, one that interlocks with other social positions like race, sexuality, and class (Hill Collins, 1990; West and Fenstermaker, 1995).

As prescriptions for gender performance, fashion models represent what feminist scholarship has critiqued as oppressive beauty standards and the objectification of women’s bodies for patriarchal and capitalist gain (Bordo, 1993; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Wolf, 1991). The National Organization for Women frequently points out the large gap between the idealized body in fashion and the average body in reality, claiming the average weight of a model is 23% lower than that of an average woman, whereas 20 years ago, the differential was only 8% (Fox, 1997). The average American fashion model is 5’11” tall and weighs 117 pounds (Smolak et al., 1996), while the average American woman is 5’4” tall and weighs about 163 pounds (Ogden et al., 2004). The gap between ideality and reality is a constant reminder that in a patriarchal capitalist order, women’s bodies are defined as inadequate.

Bodies are racially coded, and the size zero look comes in one color: white. Style.com, *Vogue* magazine’s online fashion forum, is a public catalog of designer collections sent down the runway in every show in every major Fashion Week. For the spring/summer 2007 collections, Style.com recorded the shows of 172 fashion houses, yielding a total of 677 models.<sup>2</sup> Of that 677, I counted 27 non-white models—those with dark skin ( $n = 15$ ) or Asian features ( $n = 12$ ). That’s less than 4% minority representation on the catwalk. Similarly, on the popular industry website, Models.com, there is a ranking of the ‘50 Top Women,’ a tally of models working the most

<sup>1</sup> Women are the focus of this essay because they receive the overwhelming majority of media attention each Fashion Week season, and their presence in the modeling industry is greater than men’s.

<sup>2</sup> After removing missing data, such as shows that do not report models’ identifying information, less than 5%.

prestigious editorials, runways, and campaigns. In November 2007, of the 60 featured models, there were two black models, Kinee (rank #47) and Chanel Iman (#29), and two Asians, Du Juan (#40) and Hye (#16). Why are there so few models of color?

Intersectionality theorists argue that representations of women cannot be understood without also studying race, sexuality, and class identities (Hill Collins, 1990, 2004). From medical and scientific texts dissecting the anatomical “anomalies” of native women (Gilman, 1985) to present day hip hop videos glorifying “the booty” (Hill Collins, 2004), an imperial gaze has been fixed long ago on non-white women’s bodies. Sexual stereotypes are instrumental in marking racial differences; they construct “pure white womanhood” as something to be protected (Stoler, 1989) and they legitimate the subordination of minorities. Content analyses of fashion media consistently show that darker skinned women have and continue to be posed and styled in exotic juxtaposition to the normatively white female body, if they are included in fashion at all (Arnold, 2001; Baumann, 2008; Hooks, 1992).

In addition to being sexed and raced, bodies are classed. Women perform gender and sexuality through practices that are intimately related to their class standing; for instance sexual markers like clothing and make-up are emphasized or muted depending on one’s social class (Bettie, 2003; Trautner, 2005). Class resides in the body’s corpulence too. Throughout the 20th century, overweight bodies have signaled lower class standing, while a slender physique indicates economic power, self-restraint and upper-class status (Bordo, 1993). The linkages among class, sexuality, and race exist in popular depictions of sexually restrained bourgeois white women and contrasting representations of sexually loose working-class women of color (Hill Collins, 2004). Intersectional links are enacted in organizations as well, for instance in exotic dance clubs, where middle-class establishments employ a narrowly restricted range of women’s body types, such as few overweight or racial minority women, while working-class oriented clubs employ a greater diversity of women in terms of body type and race (Trautner, 2005). Sex, race, and class inequalities are thus mutually constitutive forces governing constructions and representations of femininity.

However, textual analysis of representation allows little room to consider cultural production processes, or to tackle the puzzles of fashion model physiques: what kind of gaze imagines the female body to be white and size zero, and toward what ends?

## 2. Theories of cultural production

Representations do work. They arrange objects into sets of cultural meanings, they differentiate people into social categories, and they write scripts for personal behavior, morality and desire (Hall, 1997). But they also *take* work to get done. For all its cultural meanings, the look is fundamentally a cultural *product*; it is the outcome of an organized production process. The term “look” seemingly refers to a fixed set of physical attributes, but in fact looks are the flexible outcomes of social processes, in which bookers attempt to develop and package the kinds of appearances and personalities they predict will be desired by clients.

Bookers and clients are cultural “gatekeepers” who filter cultural goods—looks—on their way to wider public dissemination (Hirsch, 1972). Such roles constitute the growing service class of “cultural intermediaries,” those workers who create and distribute aesthetic values, shaping the wider field of possibilities of fashionable consumerist dispositions in the process (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1991; Nixon, 2003). Like art, music, television and other goods in the “cultural economy” or “aesthetic economy,” looks are unstable, which means their value is fluid, unpredictable, and constantly changing (Entwistle, 2002; Scott, 2000). As in other cultural production markets, fashion’s gatekeepers work with a high degree of demand uncertainty and

ambiguity, in which “all hits are flukes” and “nobody knows” what will be the next big thing (Aspers, 2005; Bielby and Bielby, 1994; Caves, 2000; Hirsch, 1972).

The vagaries of the modeling market are threefold. First, given the arbitrariness of subjective evaluation, bookers never know which looks will be desired by which clients. Second, clients can never know with accuracy which models will be most successful in selling their products. This is because consumer demand is fundamentally unknown (White, 2002), a vexing fact of market life that advertisers and market researchers routinely attempt to remedy, but never with much success (Zukin and Maguire, 2004). Third, the market is constantly in flux with new looks being “hot” one season and forgotten the next. Furthermore, modeling does not require extensive investments like education or training, so the entry criteria are low, and meanwhile the job is considered “cool” (Neff et al., 2005). This results in overcrowding with a great deal of struggle for success (Mears, 2008).

Given the high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity in their work, bookers and clients must rely on conventions to coordinate their actions (Godart and Mears, 2009). All art worlds, Becker argues, accomplish artistic productions with conventions, or shared ways of doing things together (Becker, 1982). Conventions tame uncertainty; they lend coherence to an otherwise turbulent market.

While producers do things together, they do not necessarily accomplish them as harmoniously as Becker’s collaborative art world concept conveys. Cultural producers also struggle internally for power and recognition, as captured by Bourdieu’s concept of a field, defined as a semi-autonomous social space with positions of more or less access to resources, or “capitals” (1983). In Bourdieu’s taxonomy of symbolic goods, producers either embrace or reject economic principles. Those who produce with an eye towards pleasing mass consumers in “large-scale production” embrace the pursuit of short-term economic capital. Those who produce for other producers in “restricted production” reject the immediate pursuit of economic gain and focus on the accumulation of prestige, or symbolic capital. Prestige is valuable in its own right as it enables one to “make a name for oneself” and it grants authority to consecrate good taste (Bourdieu, 1983). Different levels of authority within the field tend to correspond to class positions of consumers beyond the field, which Bourdieu notes as the dominant and dominated classes (1984). All cultural production fields contain this tension between prestige and profit, for example Renaissance painting (Berger, 1972), contemporary art markets (Velthuis, 2005), the literary field (Bourdieu, 1983), modern publishing markets (Van Rees, 1983; Van Rees and Vermunt, 1996; Verdaasdonk, 1983), and of course, fashion (Aspers, 2005; Bourdieu, 1996; Crane, 2000; Crane and Bovone, 2006).

Thus, while models may represent intersecting systems of gender and racial domination, models’ bodies are systematically screened for selection towards commercial and creative ends. At issue is not the extent to which modeling serves patriarchy and racial inequality, but, rather, *how* do notions of race and femininity inform the field of cultural production in the making of the look? By investigating the mode of production of this art world, we can discover those organizational mechanisms and processes that reproduce racism in pop cultural forms like fashion. The fashion modeling industry is therefore a case to discover how social inequalities reproduce themselves in seemingly unlikely places, from the design studio to the catwalk.

### 3. Data and methods

To investigate how ideas of race and femininity influence gatekeepers’ evaluations of women in the fashion industry, I observed them as they selected models to appear in catalogues, magazines, print advertising, and runway shows for Fashion Weeks in New York and London. My access to the industry’s backstage was arranged through a New York modeling agency called

Mode Model Management, where I conducted ethnography as a working model for two and a half years, and at an agency in London called Strike Models, where I worked as a model for two 6-week periods.<sup>3</sup> As a participant observer, or more like observing participant, I took part in the full span of modeling activities, including auditions, fittings, photo shoots, and rehearsals backstage for fashion shows.<sup>4</sup> I recorded observations with hand-written notes made during or just after interactions and transcribed all notes within 24 hours.

As is typical, the bookers at Mode and Strike arranged my “castings,” or auditions with potential clients. How do bookers know which models to promote to whom, and how do clients make their booking decisions? Ethnography alone could not access such questions of motivation and knowledge, so two years into the study, I interviewed the entire staffs at both Mode and Strike, speaking to 20 bookers, five accountants, three managers, and three assistants. I also interviewed a snowball sample of 40 clients working in both cities for a total of 71 interviews. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were tape-recorded. Transcriptions and field notes were analyzed and coded inductively using Atlas.ti software (see [Appendix A](#) for summaries of interview respondents).

Of the agency staffs, 20 were currently employed or had been at some point affiliated with Mode Models in New York, and 11 worked currently or at some point with Strike in London. Half of the sample was male, among them four identified as gay men, while just one of the 10 female bookers identified as lesbian. Five of the New York agents were of non-white ethnicity (four Latinos, one Asian); all of the 11 agents in London were white.

I recruited a snowball sample of 40 clients—four fashion designers, 11 photographers, seven magazine editors, six stylists, two hair/make-up artists, and 10 casting directors—at castings, backstage at fashion shows, and during photo shoots I attended following the Fashion Week season. Sixty percent of the clients were men (25), half of whom identified as gay men, and none of the female clients identified as lesbian. Nine of the 20 clients in New York were of non-white ethnicity (two black, four Latinos, three Asian), and in London there were two non-white clients (one Asian, one Latino). The sample reflects the attribute of fashion as an industry with high proportions of white gay men in decision-making positions (McRobbie, 1998; Wilson, 2005). Most bookers and clients (54 of 71) attended college for at least a year, and most (51) had an arts-related background from previous careers within the creative economy, typically as visual artists, fashion journalists, and actors (Table 1).

Mode and Strike are medium-sized “boutique” agencies that rank among the roughly 80 or so “key” agencies around the world (Callender, 2005). Their models work in all the high fashion and commercial jobs, from designer campaigns, magazine editorials, catalogues, catwalk shows, and “informal” or “fit” modeling, where models try on newly manufactured clothes in an informal setting, such as a designer’s studio on Seventh Avenue, to an audience of store buyers.

In 2006, Mode represented roughly 200 women with a staff of 25; at Strike, there were about 150 female models and staff of 11. The agencies are nearly equal in gross profits, both clearing about \$4 million in 2005. While structurally similar, the agencies differ in their size, a fact that reflects in part their respective locations in the fashion industries of London and New York. Cities anchor the kinds of unique communities and networks necessary for cultural production to

<sup>3</sup> Agencies’ names are pseudonyms.

<sup>4</sup> I modeled for several years throughout college in the markets of Atlanta, New York, Milan and Tokyo. Prior to entering graduate school, I retired from the industry for about a year before being “scouted” at a coffee shop in New York, at which point I resumed modeling work as an ethnographer.

Table 1  
Bookers and clients at a glance in New York and London.

	Total: 71	Clients (40)		Bookers (31)	
		NYC 20	London 20	NYC 20	London 11
Male	37	11	13	10	3
Gay	19	6	6	4	3
Female	34	9	7	10	8
Lesbian	1	–	–	1	–
Non-white	16	9	2	5	–
Latino	9	4	1	4	–
Asian	5	3	1	1	–
Black	2	2	–	–	–
Some college education	54	16	13	16	9
Art background	52	19	19	8	6

happen (Scott, 2000). Differences among cities also set the tone for cultural conventions and network forms specific to cultural economies, which fashion production in London and New York aptly demonstrates (Moore, 2000). Although they are both global cities and fashion capitals, these two cities vary in their type of fashion market. As a result of post-WWII development trajectories, London fashion today is a weak commercial enterprise with a stronghold in creativity with artistic concerns of “fashion for fashion’s sake,” while New York is widely regarded as a business center for fashion commerce (Moore, 2000). In the modeling economy, the divide between fashion-as-art and fashion-as-commerce acts as a means of stratifying models into the two general categories of looks, the editorial and the commercial, a divide with enormous effects on how the look takes shape.

#### 4. Selling looks: editorial and commercial markets

Bookers and clients alike preface any discussion of their work with an explanation of which end of the fashion market they serve, editorial or commercial, a split similar to the art world’s differentiation between avant-garde and commercially successful art (Bourdieu, 1983). Models in each world work different jobs, have different types of looks, earn varying amounts of prestige and income, face different levels of risk, and appeal to different audiences (Fig. 1).

Because looks are stratified thus, modeling agencies tend to differentiate their models into separate “boards” with their own circuits of bookers, models, and clients. This happens explicitly at Mode, which is divided into Editorial, Women (also called “Commercial” and “Money”), Men, and Runway boards, each with its own web page and seating arrangement within the agency. At Strike, models and bookers are not explicitly separated, but informal differentiations are made between editorial and commercial bookers and models.<sup>5</sup>

When taking on a new model, agents first decide for which type of modeling work her look is appropriate, editorial or commercial. Commercial models, affectionately referred to by bookers as “money girls” are just that: they tend to look like, and earn, a million bucks. They work in

<sup>5</sup> While modeling for both agencies, I was primarily on the editorial board, but like most models, I was able to cross over and book the occasional commercial and runway job.

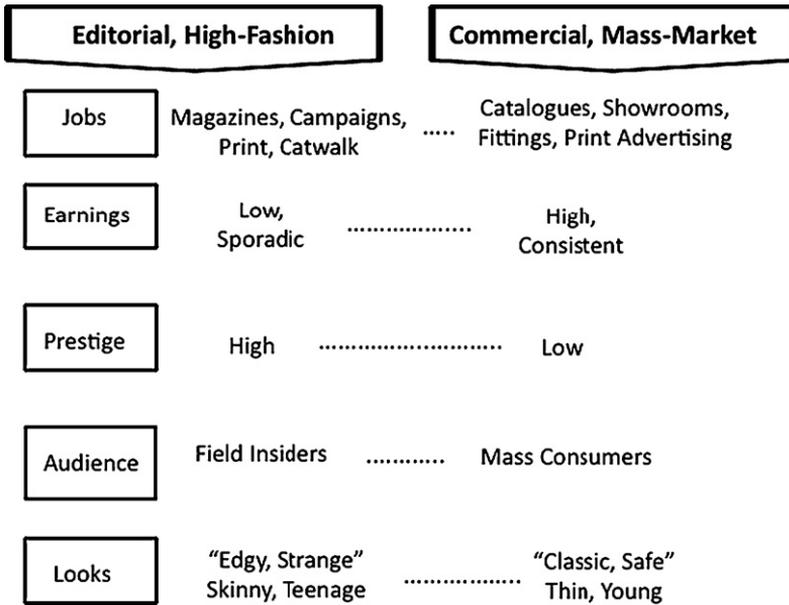


Fig. 1. Editorial and commercial worlds in the fashion field.

catalogues and commercial print advertising, jobs that pay the bills for models and agents alike. Mode has another commercial board called the Runway board, which specializes in informal showroom modeling and fittings. This board brings in well over half of all earnings to the agency. It is consistently high-volume work, though for relatively low rates averaging \$200 an hour.<sup>6</sup>

Bookers and clients describe commercial models as conventionally attractive, “glamorous,” “manicured,” “wholesome,” and “classic.” They are, very relatively speaking, *normal*, and their normality translates into reliably high, steady earnings:

The normal girl will always work. She is a constant. The normal, beautiful, great hair, great personality, tall girl will always make it. —C, NYC Editorial Booker<sup>7</sup>

When trying to describe the appeal and purpose of commercial models, producers in both the UK and U.S. made frequent references to sexual attractiveness, the “layperson,” “middle America,” and several times the mentioning of “my mom” and “Kansas” by way of illustration. Putting these word combinations together gives us a working definition of a commercial model: (1) a woman considered sexually attractive by the layperson in Kansas; or (2) a woman your mom in middle America considers pretty. For instance:

To be perfectly blunt, it’s the girls that do Victoria’s Secret, and *Sports Illustrated*, and JC Penney and Macy’s, you know, accessible to your kind of mass middle market where women want to look like, you know, women who are adored by men. You know that is bigger boobs, big hair, blonde, or at least some sort of like, you know, glamorous Giselle-type. —G, London Casting Director

<sup>6</sup> A separate Runway board does not exist at most agencies in London, since showroom and fittings are limited and poorly-paid, as clothing production is on a much smaller scale compared to New York (see Moore, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> All respondents are identified in the text by a randomly assigned letter, city of employment, and job title.

In contrast to the “boring” commercial look, an editorial model is “unique.” She is “not your everyday smiley catalogue girl.” Editorial models have an unusual—or to use a term that comes up often in modeling—an “edgy” look. Producers define edgy as meaning “extraordinary,” “off-kilt” and a “not standard” kind of look, perhaps not immediately recognizable as valuable to field outsiders:

An editorial model generally has a more, um, strong look. . . at school she was probably considered very ugly by her classmates. And some people like, my mom or whoever, might look at a picture of her in *Vogue* and say, “What’s she doing modeling? She’s strange-looking.” And she *is* strange-looking, but she’s strange in a great way. —F, London Head Booker

Not only can bookers and clients visually discern looks into different market niches, so too can they imagine which audiences will “get” which type of model:

Say you have. . . a painting that you think is so beautiful, and everyone else looks at you like ‘oh my God, she is crazy, that is so ugly!’ But it doesn’t matter, because it is a piece of art and you find it beautiful, and that is all that matters. Editorial works in the same way. . . It is more of the photographers who are shooting the campaigns, and they look at that girl, and they think she’s beautiful. She is their piece of art, and they are using her as an art form, not as a point of sale. . . It’s not for everybody. —A, NYC Scout

Being “not for everybody,” the scout explains, means not for the masses—not to entice them into consumption, nor to turn them on, nor even to make sense to them. That is because editorial looks are meant to appeal to the high-end fashion consumer and other elite producers; they are a wink and a nod to each others’ cultural competences to appreciate coded avant-garde beauty. Whereas “Apple pie” is presumed to appeal to the field of mass consumers, the edgy look is intended to resonate with the field of restricted production, i.e. other high-end fashion producers (Bourdieu, 1983). Such is the readership of avant-garde magazines. For example, the prestigious London-based magazine *i-D* boasts that its readers are “opinion formers and industry style-leaders. They influence the mass market and define brand credibility.”<sup>8</sup>

Editorial jobs such as magazine shoots and catwalk shows are the least profitable type of work, but they are by far the most prestigious and can potentially yield luxury-brand campaigns, the jackpot of fashion modeling. *i-D* magazine, for example, does not pay models, and the day rate for shooting for *Vogue* magazine is just \$150. A day rate for shooting for a catalogue client, in contrast, pays a minimum of \$2,500 per day, while a campaign can pay upwards of a million dollars, depending on usage fees. Yet editorial jobs are invaluable for their image and hype for the agency, which is vital to secure catalogue clients and high-end advertising like fragrance and cosmetic campaigns. Explained one editorial booker:

I would love to make more money, sure, everyone wants to make more money, but I bring in something else to the agency, I bring in the image, which is equally important. —D, London Editorial Booker

Models have little say in choosing which end of the market their look resonates. Hardly objective or fixed categories, “editorial” and “commercial” are self-fulfilling labels, as Entwistle (2002)

<sup>8</sup> Launched in 1980, *i-D* has a circulation of 73,016. It estimates that 82% of readers fall within UK standard magazine ABC1 socioeconomic groupings, which includes upper middle-class, middle class and lower middle classes (41% are upper and middle class while just 5% are working class). Retrieved from the Internet 12/01/2009: [http://www.i-dmagazine.com/media\\_pack/index.htm](http://www.i-dmagazine.com/media_pack/index.htm).

argues in her study of the aesthetic economy. The model labeled as commercial by her agents will do catalogue work that defines her look as commercial, whether or not she prefers an editorial career. Should a model dispute her categorization, bookers are likely to “drop” her, terminating her contract.

The editorial–commercial divide is a proxy for how producers make sense of class distinctions among imagined consumers of looks. Visually, we can picture fashion models grouped along class hierarchies with their corresponding displays of social status; there is the blue chip editorial in Prada and Gucci on one board, and the commercial middle classes donned in Target on the other. Like all cultural production organizations, Mode and Strike must find a balance between earnings and prestige—economic and symbolic capital—to stay competitive in the field (Bourdieu, 1983; see also Aspers, 2005; Entwistle, 2002). In the long run, commercial work offers safe and predictable earnings compared to the alluring but unlikely jackpot of fame and riches to be had in the more risky editorial market.

This is not to say that editorial fashion does not generate economic profit; it certainly does, but indirectly and in the long run. Consider the catwalk. Historically, the most dramatic showpieces of the salon shows never actually went into production, but rather, their purpose was to generate publicity and prestige around a fashion house (Evans, 2005). Shows are important image-making mechanisms, which can either gain or lose the attention of international editorial presses, thereby generating sales down the line for brands’ diffusion line products and prêt-à-porter labels (Crane, 2000; Moore, 2000). The high-end garments displayed on catwalks have a small profit margin—they frequently *lose* money—but they created the brand image that affixes to licensed products like perfume, sheets, and sunglasses, where the real money is made.

Models thus embody the classic tension between art and commerce. Because art is esteemed to be superior to the vulgar material interests of the market, it carries a moral authority, a credibility transferrable to products through branding and lifestyle advertising (Berger, 1972). In the modeling field, the editorial woman confers this authority and credit to the handbag, perfume, or pair of heels.

The editorial model also comes with a considerably greater amount of risk than the commercial model. While all fashion modeling—and any cultural production market—is characterized by a general sense of unpredictability and instability, uncertainty is highest at the editorial end of the market, where producers are concerned principally with aesthetic standards more so than sales and marketing goals. As Ruggerone found in her study of Italian designers, working in high-fashion means devoting oneself to the production of brand identities and aesthetics—things like “edginess”—that are at best only weakly linked with consumer desires and sellable products (Ruggerone, 2006).

In the absence of clear standards to assess their effectiveness, and with few guidelines to construct the look, producers are likely to look to and imitate each other (White, 2002). This is especially likely in the high-risk editorial market, where fleeting aesthetic preferences can quickly snowball to make—or break—a model’s career. As in other creative markets, imitation means that the “rich get richer,” resulting in a cumulative advantage effect whereby successful goods accrue more success (Salganik et al., 2006). So extreme is the success of the winners that economists call these “winner-take-all” markets, though the bulk of contestants fail (Frank and Cook, 1995). According to the Occupational Outlook Handbook, the median annual income for a model was a modest \$27,410 in 2008 (DOL, 2008).<sup>9</sup> The highest paid model at Mode did

<sup>9</sup> Because the U.S. Department of Labor includes artists’ models with fashion models, these earnings estimates should be taken as rough estimates.

considerably better, booking almost \$1 million worth of jobs, and at Strike a handful of top female models each had annual bookings worth over a £500,000 (about \$1 million). These “winners” in the editorial realm are far and few between; most editorial models at Mode and Strike make under \$50,000 annually and many have negative accounts of debts owed to their agencies, which advance start-up costs for things like pictures, plane tickets, and “pocket money.” Editorial bookers, chasing the high-stakes prize of the winner-take-all contest, oftentimes continue to invest in a model despite clients’ disinterest. At Mode, bookers told stories of a recent “flop” that cost the agency upwards of \$20,000, all because a persistent editorial booker had a “hunch” that a model’s look was going to catch on to become a winner. It did not, for reasons no one could explain.

Such stories are to the chagrin of commercial and runway bookers, who are far more market sensitive. With less at stake, they play it safe and simply drop the models that clients don’t “rent.” Commercial models have a smaller distribution of earnings, on average they earn between \$50,000 and \$350,000 a year, providing the foundations of any agency’s profits. They rarely get the chance to accumulate significant debts. Accountants at both agencies, frustrated by the “anti-economic” logic of editorial jobs, repeatedly told me they could not understand why all models don’t exclusively work for catalogues. Meanwhile, editorial bookers at Mode privately dismiss the Runway board as “B-level” models, yet without their earnings the agency would not survive.

The hidden cost of steady commercial work, then, is its toll on symbolic capital, which in the long run hinders financial gain. Taking a lesson from the art world, as a general rule, the credit attached to any cultural product tends to decrease with the size and the social spread of its audience (Bourdieu, 1996). Hence the lower value, perceived or real, attached to a commercial look. The more types of people a model is intended to resonate with, the less exceptional she is.

All of this is to say that within the high-fashion editorial market, Any-Body.Org is rather far removed from the picture. Designers and directors selecting models for Fashion Week do not choose their editorial looks with “the layperson” or “your mom” in mind, regardless of how loudly she protests outside their gates. As a field of restricted production, prized editorial fashion appeals to a small population of other producers, while the devalued commercial market speaks to the masses.

The division between editorial and commercial modeling is key to understanding how bookers and clients look for appropriate looks. As a proxy for class, the distinction is a defining feature of the organization of the field of fashion modeling. Having mapped out the market structure, I can now trace how producers on each side of the market construct and navigate legitimate criteria for choosing their models, and how such criteria engage the two touchiest factors in their hiring decisions: size and race.

## **5. Appealing to everybody: the commercial look**

The selection of a model for any booking is not meritocratic. There is no well-defined standard against which all other candidates are equally measured, since of course something as tenuous as a “look” can never be universally appreciated. Above the floor of Western beauty norms (height, weight, symmetry, and healthy skin, for example), there is no systematic means to distinguish among the excess of candidates. There are instead conventions for selecting looks. Conventions, Becker argues, are shared norms, routines, and understandings that make an art world like fashion possible (1982). They can also make the accomplishment of fashion difficult, should producers ignore them. Conventional ways of casting for models vary systematically across the spectrum of the modeling market; conventions for choosing a catalogue look are systematically

different from those in the editorial market. What are those conventions, and how do they perpetuate the skinny, racially exclusive look?

Consider first the “normal” and “safe” commercial look. In contrast to the editorial look, the commercial look is slightly older, slightly less white, and ever so slightly fuller in figure. Commercial models at both Mode and Strike are likely to be larger than editorial models, if only by a few inches. “Money girls” range in size from 2 to 6, while editorial models are more like 0–4. A hip measurement of 36” would be unacceptable on the editorial board, but it is common on the commercial boards. The colloquial term “girl” in fact accurately describes the majority of editorial models, who range in age from 13 to 22, significantly younger than commercial models who are typically at least 18 and progress into their thirties and beyond.

Returning to our protesters at London Fashion Week, note that Any-Body.Org calls for more diversity *on the catwalk*, not in the J.C. Penny’s or Marks & Spencer catalogues. London casting director Lesley Goring frankly told the *London Times* that full-figured models “wouldn’t sell collections at this level” (Bannerman, 2006). But they do sell at the commercial level, the home of “accessible” and “classic” girls-next-door. On the commercial end of the market, diversity in shape and color is more prevalent because commercial modeling is a deliberate attempt to reach a buying demographic. It is a straightforward marketing exercise:

If you look at an Old Navy commercial for example, they have this big booty black girl, she’s totally normal, looks like your best friend down the street that you have coffee with, dancing around and there’s three white girls in the background . . . that’s more like, “Well our brand is targeting everybody. We don’t want to be niche, because we want to sell the units, and selling the units means appealing to everybody.” And that’s commercial modeling. —C, NYC Stylist

Commercial producers value and search for the racially coded “big booty” as they will any look they think will resonate with their target audience. A commercial booker is likely to dismiss size zero models in favor of practical bodies for catalogue and showroom clients:

There is one who gained weight; she is now a size eight instead of a six. She has a big booty. Sometimes we might have a client that might want that big booty, like a jeans client, and we will be like, “oh, so-and-so has gained all of this weight, she can fit these clothes!” —F, NYC Runway Booker

Faced with concerns to relate to the consumer, please the client, and ultimately, sell products, commercial producers do not bother themselves with size zero models, because size zero is too “edgy.” It is incompatible with their pragmatic undertakings, as well as their understandings of mainstream beauty and sex appeal. By way of illustration, several Mode bookers drew upon the example of Rita, a skinny Puerto Rican model with cropped hair and tattoos. Rita was far too “edgy” to resonate with commercial clients, explained this booker:

If you were a buyer from Neiman Marcus in Dallas, you would be scared by Rita! Therefore, you may not buy all the outfits she is wearing, which would really be damaging to the client. And they know that. Plus, some of my clients are really tame, like St. John’s for example. You cannot put Rita in a St. John’s knit suit and expect somebody to buy it. —B, NYC Runway Head Booker

Clients explained to me that commercial casting is “simple” and “easy money.” They need only follow corporate specifications and find a “classic” beauty to cast successfully. Though commercial producers also face considerable perceptual uncertainty—for they can never

perfectly capture the direct effects of a model's appearance on sales—they are able to assess the merits of their work more so than editorial producers. In the end, a commercial job has been executed well when it leads to their boss' satisfaction, and ultimately, sales of the product.

Edge and creativity take a backseat in the commercial world, where the principle concern when booking models is profitability. Victoria's Secret, one of the most famous commercial catalogue houses, finds its future campaign models through a computer tracking system of its online catalogue. Models who “move merchandise” online get put in the running for Victoria's Secret stardom (Blakeley, 2007). The commercial producers I interviewed had less sophisticated but equally rigorous concerns for selling products. For instance, when I asked one London catalogue photographer how she chooses models, she deferred to “The Bible,” an in-house reference book of poses and styles by which photographers and stylists must abide:

With this [catalogue], it's very formulated, like the client knows exactly what they want. We've got a massive book, telling us exactly how things should be. The Bible. And it's like, you know, some girls just will not look right in the clothes, or not do the right posing. —C, London Photographer

At the end of a day of shooting, her boss and creative team review the catalogue images. If their production partners deem the model too skinny, too young, too large, or if her hair is seen to not sit well upon her head, she is not invited to come back for future shoots. If the clothes she has modeled do not sell well in the catalogue, she will eventually be dismissed.

Commercial producers are also more likely to embrace ethnic diversity among models than editorial producers, in a conscious effort to reach a target consumer. Commercial bookers talked of having to “balance” their board, and meet quotas of blondes, Asians, or brunettes to satisfy their clients. If the commercial client uses, or passes, on minority models, it is in response to a calculated cost–benefit analysis of the market. Explained one casting director on why he books non-whites for shows:

But then I have, you know I've had designers say, “Listen, like all of my buyers, all the stores I sell to are in Japan. So get me Asian girls!” —I, NYC Casting Director

One can visually discern a color divide between editorial and commercial modeling by flipping through a magazine and noticing on which pages models of color appear. Reporters for the popular fashion blog Jezebel.com did just this, counting the number of black models in advertising versus editorial in nine of the most popular women's fashion magazines.<sup>10</sup> Black women were well represented in the commercial world, appearing in the advertising pages of eight of the nine magazines. *Marie Claire*, for instance, showcased 10 black models in advertising pages, selling non-fashion items from deodorant to cosmetics; but they featured just one black model in their editorial pages. This pattern emerged across the nine magazines, in which just two black models appeared in editorial spreads (Holmes, 2007). Clients I interviewed acknowledged this pattern, but they didn't quite know what to make of it, as one freelance stylist who works with a number of top magazine publications tried to explain:

I probably shoot ethnic or Asian girls more in advertising because they have to kind of get their demographic right, don't they? Editorial, I mean for me, it's never about, kind of, about a race issue, or whatever. It's just about what I've got, you know, who I'm thinking

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<sup>10</sup> The magazines subject to this analysis were *Marie Claire*, *W*, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Allure*, *Lucky* and *Elle*.

about in my mind. So it's never, "Oh let's shoot an Asian girl," you know, for me, that's never an issue for editorial—and I don't know why, but I know I shoot more, kind of, more sort of, Asian or African girls in advertising, yeah. —F, London Stylist

This may strike some readers as counterintuitive, given the popular associations between artists and virtues of liberalism and cosmopolitanism, whereas the catalogue shoppers of "middle America" are commonly accused of parochialism and intolerance (Frank, 2004). Yet the catalogue market is where fashion embraces ethnic representation. For instance, the editor at one commercially oriented magazine explained how her team consistently hires an ethnically diverse range of models:

It's a conscious effort, but not to the point where we don't want it to seem like, "oh there's the mold, or the template for however a story should be; Asian girls, black girls, Latin girls." Like you know I try to mix it up and not make it so obvious. —K, NYC Magazine Editor

Here, diversity is strategically sought—not to be too obvious or too closely aligned with an affirmative action agenda—but just enough to increase the commercial enterprises' market share by representing the demographic base.

This is not to say that catalogue producers are the stewards of diversity and inclusion; hardly, for though they cite "your mom" in the heartland as their target audience, who's mom, exactly, do they consider? Their imagined consumer upholds a heteronormatively restrictive and idealized vision of white middle-class suburban femininity, but it is just that: an ideal with mass appeal, but nothing too surreal.

## 6. Appealing to other producers: The edgy look

If commercial producers are aiming to please, editorial producers are looking to shock in a high-stakes game of chance. Given their limited possibilities for ascertaining effectiveness—and, indeed, their putative indifference to commercial endeavors—editorial producers create fashion for fashion's sake. To this end, they need "edgy"-looking models. In contrast to the commercial look, the edgy look is younger, whiter, and appears as radically skinny. Catwalks have begun strutting American size 00, a UK size two; that's a waist measurement comparable to a typical 7-year-old girl's (Phillips, 2007). When two models died of anorexia-related illnesses in 2006, it prompted a wave of headlines, conferences, and government inquiries into the potentially deadly fashion machine (Model Health Inquiry, 2008).

At the height of the media furor, I was observing backstage at fashion shows and castings in New York and London, where modeling was business as usual—skinny models, small sample size clothes, hectic schedules—except for one thing. Clients were openly discussing their unlucky position as anorexia endorsers. They even made jokes about it. In London, one casting director spoke before a crowd of slender models at his casting: "You know, it's really hard to find size 12 to 14 girls that are fierce, I mean they're all just. . ." and here he puffed out his cheeks and raised his eyebrows, vaguely resembling the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man. "It doesn't look good," he concluded, to the laughter of his model audience. Hidden in the joke is a serious quandary: why are there no "fierce" size 12 models?

Throughout my interviews, bookers and clients unanimously agreed that the clothes determine the models. The overwhelming majority of respondents, when asked why catwalk models are a standard U.S. size 0–4, deferred to the clothes. Commercial samples tend to come in sizes 4–6,

but high-fashion designers cut samples based on standardized measurements of size 0–4. When they're in a pinch days before showing a collection, alterations are the last thing they want to handle. Unlike the catalogue studio, the catwalk does not lend itself to instant Photoshopping or safety-pinning imperfections. A problematic fit cannot be sent down the catwalk; small clothes therefore seem to necessitate small models.

Many producers relied on seemingly obvious aesthetics when explaining their taste for size zero. Skinny bodies make small clothes *look* better, they say, even if they admit those bodies at times look unhealthy or freakish:

Because [of] the shapes. Clothes hang off, they fall, they look better on a thinner model. —  
X, London Stylist

Producers talked about slenderness as aesthetic law for women. The clothes take such utmost importance that models are and should be mere clothes *hangers*, with perfectly discreet bodies that will display the clothes but not detract from them. Of course, societal norms underlie aesthetic ones, and very few codes of physical attraction are timeless or universal. Casting universal aesthetics aside, sample size clothes are not born out of thin air; they are measured, cut, and manufactured by deliberate hands. When you ask a designer why they make their samples in those particular dimensions, many answer with an appeal to tradition. Sample size is what they learned in design school, the size of their trusted mannequin on the shop floor, and the size of the models they expect agencies to provide. Producers certainly don't like the thought that their clothes may terrorize women into unhealthy body images, but they don't know how to change an entire system of fashion design either. Like the QWERTY keyboard, we end up with a certain way of doing things because over time, conventions get "locked-in," and it becomes easier to *not* change them, even if we don't like them (Arthur, 1989). Bookers and clients don't utilize the language of economics when explaining their work, but instead they understand that it's just "the way things are done."

Without conventions, art worlds like fashion would not happen (Becker, 1982). Finding the right look for an editorial job is a daunting task. Bookers estimated that anywhere between 3000 and 5000 models flock to New York during a show season, and over the course of about a week, runways with about 25 open slots must be filled. When looking for the right look, producers tend to look to each other, a normal fact of production markets noted by Harrison White (2002), but even more apparent in a cultural production market like fashion where unpredictability is the norm (Aspers, 2005). Faced with heightened uncertainty and a general lack of accountability, editorial producers are entangled in an institutionalized production system, where the goods produced—the models—are embedded in an historically shaped and commerce-driven network of agents, designers, and editors.

Every actor in the system is trying to match as best she can what she thinks will complement the demands of cooperating actors, and they must make these rapid decisions based on past records, experiences, and conventions. Agents are trying to beat their competitors by supplying what they think will go over well with designers; designers produce shows they predict will appeal to magazine editors; editors praise the kinds of looks they think their advertisers will appreciate.

Bookers control the supply of models and would seem to direct the shapes and sizes of looks, yet they deny their own agency by claiming to merely cater to the wants and needs of clients:

I think it's about fitting the clothes. That's the bottom line. 34 - 24 - 34 is the ideal size. I have no idea where that came from. Of course I don't like that, I'm not that size. If you can't

beat ‘em, join ‘em, honey! That’s the way it is. We’re not gonna change the majority here, then we’ll all be outa the job! —K, NYC Commercial Booker

The proverbial buck would seem to stop with clients, yet clients are themselves uncomfortably close to uncertainty. The editorial client fears being known as the one who passed on the next big look. At one casting for a large fashion PR firm in London, I glimpsed a telling note scribbled on a dry-erase board hung on the office wall: “Look closely! She might be a Kate Moss.”

With everyone on the lookout for next celebrated “waif,” size zero may not be the intended outcome of any particular producer, but under institutional constraints, it is locked-in as a survival strategy. Conventions, Becker notes, both enable and constrain production; they exert inertia to a set way of doing things and reproduce a structural order to art worlds which might otherwise have unlimited possibilities of arrangements (Becker, 1995). Ask a designer why they book skinny models: because that’s what the agents are providing. Ask an agent why they promote skinny models: well that’s what the designers want. And around we go. Producers overwhelmingly defer their tastemaking authority, a pattern Milkie (2002) also found in her interview study of girls’ magazine editors.

The modeling market thus is a highly institutionalized context where decisions are guided more by imitation, routine and rules of thumb than rational calculation (March and Olsen, 1979). Within these institutional constraints, producers’ tastes for models are tempered by imitation and the collective tastes of fellow producers. The ironic result is an isomorphism of the edgy look in the putatively avant-garde field of restricted production (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

Readers may at this point be wondering: what, after all, is the point of clothes if they look worse on actual bodies? This is precisely the point: editorial producers aim to depict identities, images, and feelings—not clothes—when they hire uniformly discreet bodies with field-specific distinctiveness:

Runway especially, designers want them even thinner because they want their clothes hanging on them when they walk down the runway. They don’t want people seeing the model – well they do, they want that face, but that’s all they want is the face. And the rest of the body they don’t want. —H, NYC Photographer

Beneath aesthetic codes are class and sexuality ones. It’s not that producers *don’t* want the body; they want a particular type of body for the catwalk, one that fits with the editorial look of edginess, not sexiness. In the high-fashion world, models embody a version of femininity not intended to please the middle market shopper or her presumed boyfriend. Sex doesn’t do the selling in the editorial world. Instead there is construction of unattainable fantasy femininities, envisioned by multiple gazes—gay, straight, female—with a self-referential audience of fellow elite producers in mind.

Eager to distance themselves from ordinary visions of heteronormative femininity, editorial producers actively look for the extraordinary body, one that so radically stretches norms of slenderness until it borders on what they imagine “your mom” may register as the uncanny or the ugly. Drawing on cultural imagery of white bourgeois femininity, producers conflate high-class with slenderness and sexual unavailability. Any trace of curves and their accompanying suggestions of female sexual desire and availability are polluting images for high-end brands and high-end femininities. In other words, curves are seen as cheap. In constructing the editorial look, bookers and clients deliberately strip sex from the editorial body:

I find boobs on the runway a little scary unless they’re like in a corset or something or really like tamed and controlled. If you get a bit of boob action going on in a flimsy summer frock it’s just all bubbling all the way down the catwalk, isn’t it? It’s just like everything wobbles. It doesn’t look so good. —M, London Casting Director

No, indeed, it is hardly appropriate for an elite symbol to flaunt her body, uncontrolled flesh wobbling cheaply for down-market consumption. Sexual unavailability is instrumental to producing high-end femininity. It is a key marker for fashionable elite sensibility.

So too is whiteness. The paucity of models of color is similarly a matter of conventions in the editorial market. At *Mode*, there were about 20 out of 200 women of color on the books. At *Strike*, there were 8 out of 150—proportions for which agents readily apologized, bemoaning the difficulties they face trying to diversify:

Yeah, we don't have many. It's very small, actually, it doesn't quite, it's shameful, actually. I just think more and more you just kind of like, I don't know, it's just so difficult to book the black girls and the Asian girls these days. . . . Because they don't work as much and it's all—at the end of the day, we're a business. —E, London Commercial Booker

It is not the case that women of color “opt out” of editorial and high fashion. Agencies' supplies of models are relatively unlimited, as they constantly refresh their boards by tapping into global networks of scouts, taking international scouting trips, and even direct quests for models to fill specific niches, for instance Elite Mode Management's notorious search for a dark-skinned model in remote villages of sub-Saharan Africa (Lacey, 2003). Self-selection effects, such as class or racial barriers that may limit the immediate availability of non-white models, most likely do not play a significant role in preventing agencies' supplies of minorities.<sup>11</sup>

Bookers therefore could take on more models of color, and though they claim to “love flavor,” they concede to the demands of their clients. They share a common understanding that ethnic models will find fewer job opportunities than their white counterparts. Clients and “the market” are largely to blame for any racial imbalance. As one booker put it, “It's literally what the market has. . . . It has nothing to do with us.”

Like bookers, editorial clients defer their hiring practices to the whims of “the market,” perceived of as a formidable, though rational, force:

Okay let's say Prada. You don't have a huge amount of black people buying Prada. They can't afford it. Okay so that's economics there. So why put a black face? They put a white face, because those are the ones that buy the clothes. —L, NYC Stylist

But what is “the market?” Ethnic fashion is indeed consumed on a smaller scale; black households spent \$22 billion on clothing in 2005 when total U.S. apparel sales reached \$181 billion; that's a black market share of 13% (Target Market News, 2005; NPD Group, 2006). Producers assume that non-white models are far and few between because ethnic looks just don't resonate with a majority white buying public. This is relevant at the commercial level of fashion, where in fact producers consider consumer demographics and choose representative models accordingly. But at the editorial end, the relationship between models and units sold is blurred. It's not clear that a model on the Prada runway is selling anything. Editorial tastemakers are not beholden to the buying public, and for them, “the market,” is a set of self-referential conventions about one another's taste for the “edgy.”

Rather than blaming consumer demand, several editorial clients laid blame squarely back onto the bookers for the racial imbalance:

<sup>11</sup> As Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) note, class is the least significant demographic criterion to enter the market, since models from all backgrounds have equal chances to succeed—and to fail.

Me personally, in my opinion, there really is no good, good, black girl around. The really good, good black girl around are still the same, and are still the one that everybody wants. . . It's very difficult to find one. The agency don't deliver enough choice to make happy the client [*sic*]. —O, NYC Casting Director

And around we go, yet again: bookers claim to be limited by the demands of clients and clients claim to be limited by bookers' supply. However, both sides agree that it's very hard to find a *good* ethnic model, presumably in comparison to their white counterparts, where good ones can be found aplenty:

There's so very few that, so very few good ones. To be honest I think if there were more good ones here, they would be used. . . I don't think — I'd definitely say that nobody here's opposed to using them. It's just that there's not enough good ones. —M, London Casting Director

Agents are keenly aware of the alleged “shortage” and are under agency orders to scout for *really good* ethnic models. What makes a *really good* ethnic model? This makes for a tough interview question, one that producers could at best answer negatively, by describing those qualities that *do not* make a good ethnic model. Sheepishly, with a kind of awkward guilt, several bookers and clients drew from stereotypes of the “other” body and cultural associations of ethnicity with urban roughness:

We don't like using the same model too often, but it's harder to find ethnic girls. And. . .well, I don't want to sound racist, but— well for Asians, it's hard to find tall girls that will fit the clothes because most of them are very petit. For black girls, I guess— black girls have a harder edge kind of look, like if I'm shooting something really edgy, I'll use a black girl, it always just depends on the clothes. —A, NYC Magazine Editor

Many bookers and clients responded to the question of ethnic models by predominantly discussing their woes in booking black women, as though the problem of diversity deals chiefly with blackness over other ethnicities. This makes sense, given the historical operation of racial categories, in particular to the ways in which whiteness over time has expanded to include white ethnics, and increasingly, Asians and Hispanics. As long as blacks are present, a backdoor is open through which non-blacks can “pass,” if not as white, then as non-problematic categories (Warren and Twine, 1997). While fashion producers on the whole seem wedded to the ideal of racial equality, their attention inadvertently turned to that troublesome race anchor, blackness, so disruptive to their liberal adherence to global anti-racist norms. A few bookers explained the issue of representing minority women as a problem of black physiognomy:

A lot of black girls have got very wide noses. . . The rest of her face is flat, therefore, in a flat image, your nose, it broadens in a photograph. It's already wide, it looks humongous in the photograph. I think that's, there's an element of that, a lot of very beautiful black girls are moved out by their noses, some of them. —H, London Agency Director

But it's also really hard to scout a good black girl. Because they have to have the right nose and the right bottom. Most black girls have wide noses and big bottoms so if you can find that right body and that right face, but it's hard. —A, NYC Agency Scout

What matters is not the truth or falsehood of physical differences between white and non-white women, but rather, it is the *presumption* that such differences are unattractive and problematic. The implicit frame of beauty is so narrowly molded around whiteness that any deviation from a white, bourgeois body is viewed as problematic.

Pulling on historic tropes of deviant black sexuality, such as the fame generated around Josephine Baker's rear end or the public autopsy of Sarah Bartmann, the "Hottentot Venus" of 1810, a few clients and bookers mentioned the backside as particularly problematic to booking black models. Such tropes surfaced as clients explicitly equated black models with sexual availability. For instance, a renown stylist in London, who initially claimed he didn't like having to think about things like race in his work, proudly told me he had recently used a black model for an editorial shoot:

Yeah, and I did that one project because I really wanted to do that project. And it was – yeah, in a way it was like a sexuality that I wanted. But I felt like I could only get it out of a black girl. —B, London Stylist

Producers suggested associations between black looks and tawdriness. I spoke with one young New York designer in her downtown studio moments after she held her Fashion Week show casting. She had seen about 60 models in the last two days, and having decided on five of them, she stood, arms crossed, looking happily at their modeling cards spread out on the floor in front of her. While explaining her choices, she stopped herself to reflect: "I was thinking about what you asked about why do I choose the girls I do, and I realized sometimes I kind of feel a little racist, because look—" and she gestured to the pictures of models: all pale, blonde, young, thin. "I mean this girl has a really pretty face—" and she picked up a card from the stack of rejects, this one with a headshot of a young black woman wearing an Afro, and said:

I don't know, sometimes I feel like the black models aren't the same image that I want to show, like they're kind of, [pause] err, not high fashion, or a little cheesy in a sense. I want someone that looks really different or not ordinary. —D, NYC Designer

Beauty is desired because it is idealized and unattainable, two criteria fundamentally incompatible with historical representations of non-white women. A *really good* ethnic model, then, is one who embodies an attempt to reconcile contradictory social categories, which one stylist calls the *high-end ethnic* look:

Basically, high-end ethnic means, the only thing that is not white about you is that you are black. Everything else, you are totally white. You have the same body as a white girl. You have the same aura, you have the same the old, aristocratic atmosphere about you, but your skin is dark. —C, NYC Stylist

Because *ethnic* is automatically distanced from the *high end*, and thus relegated to the commercial realm, editorial producers must search for a model of color who can embody an air of rarity, no easy feat given the entrenched construction of non-white ethnicity as vulgar. The high-end ethnic look materializes in one of two ways. In the first instance, fashion producers create *ethnicity lite* with sanitized racial markers. This look is not confined to the editorial sphere, but is visible across all advertising spheres including television commercial advertisements, where studies show that black models tend to be light-skinned (Entman and Book, 2000). Some producers praise this look as a positive step towards racial inclusion, though it entails a rather limited definition of diversity:

I will say that [Designer X] is very open to ethnic models, they use one of my black girls. She's very small-featured, almost like a white girl who is black. And then they use a half-Asian girl for me. So, they are very open to ethnic models, which is good. —B, NYC Runway Head Booker

Other producers criticize this approach to non-white models as deliberately washing out ethnicity:

“She’s too black, she’s too dark, her lips are too big. We want black but not too black.” It’s shocking! It’s really, really shocking. . . I’ve seen girls, and they’d say “no, no she’s too Hispanic.” The ethnic girl needs to represent everything that they’re afraid of in a way that they’re not gonna be afraid. —F, NYC Casting Director

In the second approach to constructing the high-end ethnic look, producers embrace racial markers to create striking exoticism, best represented by Alec Wek, a famous bald Sudanese model with very dark skin. This is the sort of “funky” model that bookers and clients claim to really enjoy booking, but they always acknowledge the difficulties in doing so:

I want a great tall, great body, funky-looking black girl. Dark skin. Not *dark* dark, but could be. Depends. . . But we have had black girls here that have not worked, that Leah Kabetty type of girl, you know a gorgeous girl, but a little bit lighter, or I would say, *whiter*. People want a white black girl. —C, NYC Editorial Booker

Because producers operate with tacit negative assumptions of the racialized body, they expect non-white bodies to be unruly and not fit for high-end display. As the marked category against the unmarked norm of white beauty, “ethnic looks” call attention to themselves in ways producers have trouble talking about. The trick in fashion, an industry of eccentric, liberal-minded artist-types, is to create the cultural paradox of the high-end ethnic look without being culturally offensive. To do this, fashion producers must sometimes “talk nasty” about minority models without sounding racist, a “PC” trend noted by [Bonilla-Silva \(2003\)](#). Sociologists have argued that since the achievement of formal legal equality in the 1960s, racism has taken the form of “colorblindness.” Given the social unacceptability of bigotry, racial inequalities today are thought of as being about culture or individual choice—anything *but* race—and never structural in nature ([Bonilla-Silva, 2003](#)). Colorblind racism takes on an ironic meaning in the fashion industry, because it is here that color cannot *not* be noticed. Producers discuss their decisions entirely in terms of aesthetics and appearances, but never do their preferences for white models have anything to do with racial beliefs:

I don’t know, I think it’s just an aesthetic, really, to be honest with you, it’s not that we don’t [use minorities]. . . It’s just that certain clients— It’s a very PC thing, isn’t it? . . . Well, it’s not that they’re not suggested, but it’s about what’s appropriate. And you know, I don’t know, you know, I think, I hate to say it, but I still think we live in a very racist society, and that’s just as a general comment. —R, London Casting Director

Non-white models are seldom deemed “appropriate” at the editorial level. Ostensibly this is not a racial issue but a mere aesthetic one. A similar line of reasoning kept the NYC Radio City Music Hall Rockettes exclusively white until 1987. Black dancers were excluded, explained directors, not due to racism, but rather because of an “aesthetic of uniformity” and symmetry which would be disturbed by the introduction of a black pair of legs in the line. Surely symmetry could be achieved in a myriad of ways, such as by hiring all black dancers, or anchoring the line with dark-skinned dancers, or placing them at even intervals throughout the line ([Williams, 1989](#)). At issue, of course, is not the aesthetics of race, but the cultural meanings of race, the hidden yet powerful historical baggage that hangs onto dark skin. It is analytically impossible to separate aesthetics from culture, but it is a savvy maneuver to avert political responsibility in “mere” aesthetic preferences.

Today the “aesthetic of uniformity” is frequently evoked to account for white catwalks. The models are uniformly white, so producers claim, in an effort to highlight the clothes rather than the model:

I mean almost everyone has this very specific blank, blond look and I wish they cast it differently, we all do. . . What’s happened I think is that to keep the eye on fashion, on the clothes and not on the girls, they’ve taken all personality off the runway and off the girls. — G, NYC Magazine Editor

Colorblindness reaches so far into the heart of the cultural producer that she can barely stand to mention the term “race,” preferring instead the ambiguous language of “personality.” While “The Absence of Color” was the subject for debate at the NYPL event, “personality” was the word of choice for those reluctant to talk about race or racism, and participants repeatedly decried lack of models with “character” among the hoards of nameless, faceless “blank slates”—colorblind code wording for “white models,” who can presumably show clothes without distracting from them.

Editorial modeling is not about showing clothes; it’s about projecting an ideal brand world, one in which women of color don’t fit. At the editorial end, “the market” follows an invisible hand of racism, a subconscious personal preference deeply rooted in cultural history. If this is the case, maybe it’s not so interesting to ask why there are so few ethnic models in editorial modeling, but rather, why are there any at all? The answer is born of producers’ deliberate attempts to *not* seem racist:

There always has to be at least one because they don’t want to offend any group, you know. So I always try to get one Asian, one black and also I think it does a service to a designer if we are trying, if we have *Essence* magazine, if we have *Trace* magazine. —I, NYC Casting Director

As the marked category against the unmarked white hegemony, non-whiteness calls attention to itself. For the majority white high-end cultural producers, it goes without saying that they want a *specific* non-white model, one that will fit in an entrenched and subconscious valorization of whiteness. The presence of non-whites may make a statement or reach out to a consumer, but it always does something that involves a conscious decision in a way that the hiring of white models does not.

## 7. Conclusions: cultural production and the reproduction of culture

As cultural intermediaries, bookers and clients play a crucial, if invisible, role in crafting representations of women in popular culture. They rely heavily on routines and conventions to funnel appropriate looks into the fashion market, much like other producers in Becker’s art worlds. As Bourdieu’s field theory predicts, producers draw from systematically different sets of conventions depending on their location in the field of restricted (editorial) or large-scale (commercial) production. Within these two spheres, models are chosen to embody a market-specific version of femininity. Producers envision feminine ideals to be consistent with how they imagine audiences and with how they think middle-class or elite femininity should be expressed. The look thus articulates ideas and presentations of gender, sexuality, and race that are mediated by class.

Class differences appear in the look in very concrete ways. The “look” of extreme slenderness and whiteness takes hold in the editorial market, whereas mainstream beauty norms and

demographic representativeness prevail in the commercial market. In the commercial market, a fuller-figured and more racially diverse look is normal; it is part of a standard, classic image that is understood to appeal to the middle-class “layperson.” In a straightforward marketing game, producers identify their demographics, create, and operationalize a risk-free look that will be successful, defined as units sold.

While the commercial world is driven by a functional imperative to sell to mass consumers, producers in the editorial world are attempting to awe and inspire each other. They choose models principally because they *do not* have anything in common with the average shopper. This world is driven by its own insular taste picking up on idiosyncrasies of elite producers who play off each other. Editorial fashion is both the “economic world reversed” in Bourdieu’s terms, and in a sense it is the *beauty world reversed*. It is disengaged from mainstream reality in attempts to construct an imaginary world to which high-end brands belong. Here, producers prize distinction, defined narrowly in white upper-class and sexually unavailable terms.

The racial underpinnings of the modeling economy produce a certain type of racism, colorblind racism, which producers don’t like to recognize. Racism is not a stable identity category, but rather it composes tacit understandings that structure our vision and guide our actions without our full awareness (Fredrickson, 2002). While bookers and clients are wedded to racial equality, they do not see any *really good* models of color around, just as there are no “fierce” size 12 girls, because with tacitly racist, sexist assumptions, they do not fit the bill. Because it’s a white, elite bill. Like a fish in water, producers swim in whiteness. It is the invisible yardstick against which they measure all bodies; it is “everything and nothing” (Dyer, 1993).

Bookers and clients cannot, or more likely, will not, recognize this. Instead, they diffuse blame and social responsibility onto one another, imagining themselves helpless against the inevitable strength and rationality of “the market.” They feel caught in the self-perpetuating cycle of production, struggling to make decisions under enormous uncertainty, basing their decisions on what has worked in the past, constrained by what they can only imagine will be successful in the future. As a structural organization system, the modeling market appears to be an external force to bookers and clients, though it is a product of their collectively entangled actions, informed by commonly held assumptions about racial and class differences. As in any organized production system, race and gender are built into the fashion modeling economy. Cultural ideas about gender, race, and class are inextricable parts of the institutionalized production processes and conventions necessary for fashion to function at all. The “look” of whiteness and size zero may not be the intended outcome from any one producer, but through the durability of conventions, they are institutionally reproduced.

While editorial producers have more authority than commercial producers to pursue their personal taste in “edginess,” they face greater uncertainty amid higher stakes and are ironically therefore more likely to defer decisions to imitation, racial stereotypes, and market conventions. Passing the buck, however, is itself an enactment of agency that involves a willing decision to defer to “the market.” Through these small acts of deference, producers strengthen the power of conventions in the fashion world, thus reproducing a structural order to cultural representations even as they outwardly reject them as distorted, unfair, and unrealistic. Bookers and clients are cultural producers in the sense that they are creators of culture, and also they reproduce culture, invoking and reworking our shared cultural history of racism when looking for the right look.

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## Appendix A

See Tables A.1 and A.2.

Table A.1

Summary of bookers and agency staff in New York and London.

Name	Job title	Type of booker	Experience
New York sample			
A	Scout/PR	Scout	11
B	Head booker	Runway	11
C	Booker	Editorial	7
D	Head booker	Commercial	18
E	Booker	Runway	10
F	Booker	Runway	10
G	Owner	Owner	26
H	Booker	Editorial	9
J	Booker	Commercial	28
K	Booker	Commercial	10
L	Director	Commercial	37
M	Booker	All	8
O	Booker	Runway	9
P	Booker	Editorial	12
Q	Booker	Editorial	10
R	Booker	Commercial	8
S	Booker	Runway	6
X	Accounts	–	1
Y	Accounts	–	5
Z	Accounts	–	7
Name	Job title	Type of booker	Years experience
London sample			
A	Assistant	–	1
B	Assistant	–	1
C	Booker	All	5
D	Booker	Editorial	12
E	Booker	All	3.5
F	Head booker	Editorial	26
G	Booker	Editorial	5
H	Director	All	26
I	Accounts	–	1
J	Accounts	–	5
K	Booker	All	5

Table A.2

Summary of clients interviewed in New York and London.

New York sample			London sample		
Name	Job title	Years experience	Name	Job title	Years experience
A	Magazine editor	8	A	Photographer	8
B	Photographer	6	B	Stylist	12
C	Stylist	10	C	Photographer	2
D	Designer	5	E	Photographer	15
E	Designer	5	F	Stylist	8
F	Casting director	10	G	Casting director	1
G	Magazine editor	10	H	Designers	20
H	Photographer	17	I	Magazine editor	3
I	Casting director	14	J	Hair stylist	20
J	Magazine editor	10	K	Magazine editor	3
K	Magazine editor	8	L	Photographer	12
L	Stylist	16	M	Casting director	5
M	Photographer	4	N	Photographer	8
N	Magazine editor	15	O	Casting director	15
O	Casting director	23	R	Casting director	20
P	Casting director	2	T	Photographer	5
Q	Photographer	11	U	Photographer	10
R	Casting director	17	V	Designer	5
S	Stylist	5	W	Make-up artist	11
T	Casting director	20	X	Stylist	8

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