

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Racechange Is the New Black: Racial Accessorizing and Racial Tourism in High Fashion as Constraints on Rhetorical Agency

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This essay argues that racial performance in high fashion functions as a disciplinary visual rhetoric which severely constrains objections to the myth of postraciality and enables claims that race is no longer a meaningful category of analysis. Racial performances limit the rhetorical agency of marginalized groups in two ways: They reduce racial identity to a mere accessory and they frame racial interaction as a short-lived tourist encounter. Treating race as an accessory equates Black and White bodies, creating an illusion of equality, while fashion tourism reduces race to spectacle at the expense of the voices of marginalized groups. Racechange in high fashion thus functions as part of a postracial “common sense” that limits the rhetorical agency of persons of color.

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Beginning in late 2009, the fashion industry turned, en masse, to the use of makeup and costuming in an attempt to visually transcend the boundaries of race—a photograph in *V Magazine* depicted two White models, one in blackface and one in her “whiteface,” wrestling naked; Karl Lagerfeld opened a fashion show in Shanghai with a film featuring models in yellowface; the 90th anniversary issue of *Vogue Paris* featured a White model in black body paint and elaborate “African-inspired” costuming; and models on an episode of *America’s Next Top Model* (“ANTM”) performed biracial transformations. Not to be outdone by the race-inspired fashion that followed his Pre-Fall 2010 Collection, Paris-Shanghai, Lagerfeld recently introduced his Pre-Fall 2012 Collection, Bombay-Paris, with a lavish recreation of a maharaja’s palace populated by White and Indian models in thick black eye makeup and ornate jewelry. *The New York Times* dubbed the show “Exotic India Wrapped in Chanel,” and Lagerfeld described his styles as “saris worn like a scarf and a touch of what hippies would like” (Menkes, 2011). While ANTM has been putting models in racial and ethnic costuming since Cycle 2, the practice of racial performance increased dramatically, and I would contend not coincidentally, throughout the fashion industry after the

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2008 election of U.S. President Barack Obama.¹ As a result, “postracial” America is increasingly inundated with and influenced by images of racial performances in high fashion from around the world.

The pervasiveness of representations of racial performance in America, a practice which Susan Gubar (2000) terms “racechange” (p. 5), suggests a growing belief among many in the fashion and media industries that employing racially and culturally influenced costuming is both marketable and chic.² Notably, fashion designers are deemphasizing exaggerated, comedic racial performances in favor of purportedly realistic mimicry, a veritable simulation of the original—and journalists are emphasizing their new attitudes toward racial performance. Accompanied by seemingly socially and politically empowering suggestion that “color is in,” mainstream fashion campaigns have sought to revive and redeploy mantras of racial emancipation popularized in the 1960s, such as “Black is beautiful,” and create alternatives to traditional American blackface performances of the 1920s and earlier (Walker, 2007, pp. 169–170). Indeed, even high-profile fashion designers such as Alexander Lee McQueen, whose extraordinarily popular and surprisingly uncritically presented posthumous retrospective exhibit recently ended its run at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, legitimates the view that embracing race and primitivism in fashion can and should be done in a progressive and sophisticated manner. McQueen’s work, of course, engages with such concepts by rejecting traditional norms of beauty and instead emphasizing the extreme and bizarre. Nonetheless, beneath the thin veneer of multicultural celebration and hip intellectualism, McQueen’s designs are more concerned with appropriating oddities, stereotypes, and wild animals and placing them in a new and Western-appropriate context than any real and substantial engagement with race. “What I do,” McQueen proclaims, “is look at ancient African tribes, and the way they dress. The rituals of how they dress . . . There’s a lot of tribalism in the collections” (Bolton, 2011, p. 150).

Despite his problematic references to the African tribalism and often questionable presentations of race and history, McQueen’s racially inspired designs are emblematic of the zeitgeist of postracial America: Purported authenticity and faithfulness to the “original” of race and culture operates as a *carte blanche* to engage in and publicize racechange in fashion. The catalog of McQueen’s show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, entitled *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, received a significant amount of critical acclaim, even being included on some lists of the best books of 2011. Lagerfeld’s films, *Vogue Paris*, *V Magazine*, and *ANTM* have received a great deal of attention as well, and though it has not always been positive, the focus on these high fashion texts signals their importance for both high culture and popular audiences. Nonetheless, recent haute couture interpretations of racial performance have received relatively little scholarly attention—this critical essay advances a much-needed conversation about these increasingly common texts.

Through visual rhetorical analysis of images of racial performance from American and international fashion designers which have circulated widely in US popular media, I argue that racechange in high fashion operates as a visual rhetorical means

of proclaiming the triumph of the postracial while simultaneously naturalizing race and limiting the rhetorical agency of those who wish to speak against the myth of postraciality. Two visual rhetorical processes work in tandem to effect this naturalization of race and deprivation of rhetorical agency: the transformation of race from an identity category into a costuming element and the presentation of the newly estheticized race as a tourist enterprise. In the first process, the focus on race as an esthetic category, far from celebrating difference and diversity in a manner consistent with the civil rights movements it echoes, depoliticizes the social construct, negating its continuing material consequences of race and culture in contemporary America. Racechange in high fashion is thus the logical outcome of the coalescence of postracial philosophy and the fashion industry—in an age in which race is no longer thought to be a socially, politically, or economically meaningful category (Joseph, 2009), racial markers can be deployed as postmodern costuming elements, worn and removed at will. In the second process, racechange in high fashion operates as tourist encounter, focused on offering snapshots of racial identities. Such a frame allows models to publicly explore difference “without any of the risks associated with being a racial minority in real life” (Nakamura, 1996). Further, racial tourism permits interaction with difference without social, political, or economic obligation while, consistent with postracial ideologies, recognizing difference for its exoticness and novelty instead of its continuing material significance.

The estheticization of race and racial tourism in high fashion has significant implications for rhetorical agency. Through the estheticization of race, racial performances in high fashion discipline bodies of color by equating them with White bodies. Visual equality comes to represent social and political equality, silencing those who object to the myth of postraciality. Thus, insofar as it limits potential for democratic engagement on questions of race and raciality, racechange in fashion implicates the formation of citizenship and exercise of rhetorical agency in this era of neoliberalism (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). Similarly, racial tourism has significant implications for the meaning of rhetor and audience, especially in a postracial era: As a practice, racial tourism necessitates acceptance of subject positions of tourist and performer (Desmond, 1999, p. xvi) thereby contradicting the notion that America is beyond race. Specifically, the high fashion images discussed in this article simultaneously represent postraciality vis-à-vis their embrace of racial performance and reinscribe racial hierarchies vis-à-vis their creation of moments for touristic voyeurism. Indeed, these images are worthy of further examination precisely because of their internally contradictory effects of normalizing racial categories while appearing to embrace a world that has transcended that marker of identity.

Some have argued that racechange in fashion is a product of ignorance rather than racism and that the fashion industry is merely performing its core function, namely creating and selling iconic fashions. For example, Zandile Blay of the *Huffington Post* observes that despite the “cheap gimmick” of White models in blackface, *Vogue Paris* former Editor-in-Chief “Carine Roitfeld doesn’t hate Black people—she probably doesn’t know any” (2009). Yet as Hall suggests “[w]hat is significant is not that

[the apparatuses of ideological production] produce a racist ideology, from some single-minded and unified conception of the world, but that they are so powerfully constrained—‘spoken by’—a particular set of ideological discourses” (1990, p. 19). Under Hall’s framework, theorizing racial representations is as much about reading and deconstructing the ideologies which inform high fashion’s representations of difference as it is to hold the fashion industry accountable for its images. And while I would argue that self-policing representations of race is indeed the responsibility of influential and omnipresent media industries, especially the fashion industry which often touts itself as politically engaged and intellectually minded, this article focuses on the critical reading and unpacking of the *implications* of those representations. As a result, the question of the accountability of the fashion industry becomes secondary to that of the emancipation of marginalized groups, replacing often unproductive debates over blameworthiness with empowering discussions of representation and rhetorical agency.

My visual rhetorical analysis (Prelli, 2006; Hariman & Lucaites, 2007; Olson, Finnegan, & Hope, 2008) centers on several prominent examples of racial performance in high fashion from 2009 to the present, namely Chanel’s recent fashion shows, *Vogue Paris*, *V Magazine*, and Cycle 13 of *ANTM*. As Robert Hariman and John Lucaites (2007) suggest, studying “the rhetorical power of the icon” is of immense value in revealing the ideological function of popular imagery, especially with respect to the ability to access the audience’s tacit knowledge to construct social organization, identity, and power (p. 9). In focusing on images taken from the world of high fashion, I investigate the ways in which popular media representations of racechange contribute to the normalization of postracial “common sense” in the United States (Hall, 1990, p. 8). My reading of these texts draws upon existing critical rhetorical work discussing race and coloniality (Shome, 1996; Hasian & Delgado, 1998; Lacy & Ono, 2010) in order to facilitate “unmasking relations of domination within the context of race” (McKerrow, 2010, p. x). I understand racechange in high fashion as a disciplinary rhetoric which significantly alters the landscape in which dialogue and dissent on issues of race and postraciality occurs. I thus seek to contribute to ongoing conversations about rhetorical agency by focusing on these texts as a means of naturalizing discourses of postraciality and contributing to contemporary inferential racism.

This article is divided into four parts. In the first part, I survey existing literature on rhetorical agency, situate my visual rhetorical analysis, and demonstrate the tendency of racial performance in high fashion to operate as a strategic rhetoric of whiteness (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). In the second part, I read racial performance in high fashion as a means of transforming race into a postracial accessory. In the third part, I read racial performances in high fashion as visual rhetorical tourist encounters. In doing so, I identify three manifestations of visual rhetorical racial tourism: Voyeuristic tourism is the consumption of particular, palatable images of race from an exterior racial or cultural space; static esthetics of beauty indicate a desire to construct a timeless, colonized other reflective of White beauty; and

spectacular corporeality places emphasis on exceptional as opposed to everyday historical, political, social, and economic conditions (Desmond, 1999). Finally, in the fourth part of the essay, I consider the implications of racechange in fashion on resistance to postracial ideology and the disciplining of the body.

Rhetorical agency in a postracial world

Rhetorical agency is a concept that is both increasingly of interest to rhetorical scholars, especially those theorizing race, gender, and class, and significant in understanding the negotiation of these categories of difference in public culture. Stacy Sowards (2010), echoing Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (2005), notes that “despite recent efforts to theorize and define this term,” rhetorical agency “remains ambiguous and unpredictable” (p. 226). Indeed, rhetorical agency can refer to a multiplicity of concepts, including “invention, strategies, authorship, institutional power, identity, subjectivity, practices, and subject positions, among others” (Campbell, 2005, p.1). Sowards notes that rhetorical agency is not a stable object but rather a “relational and an ongoing negotiation with oneself, interactions, and power structures within social and material constraints” (2010, p. 226).

I analyze racechange in high fashion as a limit to invention and negotiation, and more specifically, a means of enabling and normalizing postracial discourses while simultaneously constraining resistance to them. Such a reading draws upon a rich array of recent scholarship on rhetorical agency, especially in connection with categories of race and gender. For Campbell, rhetorical agency is “communal and participatory, hence, both constituted and constrained by externals that are material and symbolic” (2005, p. 2). In addition, rhetorical agency “refers to the capacity to act, that is have the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one’s community” (p. 3). A number of scholars exploring race and gender and rhetoric use similar frames as Campbell to understand enabling/constraining discourses which facilitate the acceptance of raced and gendered ideologies. Amy Koerber (2006), for instance, uses rhetorical agency to map disciplinary rhetorics of breastfeeding and resulting resistance. She, like Campbell, indicates that while it is possible to negotiate resistance to disciplinary rhetorics and choose between alternatives, “it is also clear that this ability to choose has limits” (2006, p. 87). Koerber (2006) points out that “disciplinary power can be understood as not only dictating what subjects should do, but also as producing the very rhetorical situations in which they act by specifying what their bodies can do” (p. 91). And most recently, Sowards (2010) and Darrel Enck-Wanzer (2011) examine Dorothy Huerta’s work as a means of creating new, liberatory modes of rhetorical agency, especially for Latinos and Latinas. Enck-Wanzer states that “[rhetorical] agency is an authorizing force—it functions in a manner best described as *a priori* in relation to discourse, including the discursive production of identity” (2011, pp. 345–346). In keeping with recent work on rhetorical agency, and Enck-Wanzer’s definition in particular, I understand the concept not in its traditional form, as the intentionalist, humanist notion that

has been subject to frequent critique (Greene, 2004; Lundberg & Gunn, 2005), but as a fluid and situated set of possibilities for invention, constraining, and enabled by existing rhetorics, representations, and materialities. While a number of existing studies of rhetorical agency have focused on resistance through reclamation and reinterpretation of disciplinary discourses, I focus on the evolution of racist common sense through postracial ideology as a means of neutralizing resistance and creating new constraints and limits on responses to the myth of postraciality.

Racial performance in high fashion is one such means of constraining resistance. While many scholars have argued that the fashion system necessarily disciplines the body (e.g., Benstock & Ferriss, 1994, p. 8), the specific deployment of racechange to perpetuate the ideology of postracial society is a relatively new one, and one that is productively explored as a means of disciplining subjects and quieting claims of race-based discrimination. Disciplinary power, for Michel Foucault, rests on the transformation of bodies into objects through the exercise of power and observation (Foucault, 1978, pp. 9–11). Ralina Joseph identifies one of *ANTM*'s disciplinary postracial discourses, namely the need for models to be “racially specific enough to connote difference, desire, and exoticism, but enough of a colorblind, blank slate to acquire success in the commercial, white-desirous marketplace” (2009, p. 242). In other words, understood in the context of postracial ideology, the malleability of race is a sign that identity is no longer so materially important and socially significant that it cannot be overcome. Similarly, Amy Adele Hasinoff points out that *ANTM* “signals a new neoliberal rhetoric of race in popular culture in which the increased visibility of racial identities is deployed to commodify race and maintain its political invisibility” (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 325). According to Hasinoff, *ANTM* reduces race to a superficial aspect of identity and applauds the ability to change from one race to another, downplaying certain racial characteristics in order to become more marketable to audiences (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 325). Through the manipulations of race, *ANTM*, in particular, sets the stage for high fashion to embrace the ideology of postraciality, or more specifically the belief that it is “not the color-line, not racism, not sexism, and not abuses of power, but race and gender as mere categories of analysis” that are problematic (Joseph 2009, p. 239). The discourse of postraciality thus perpetuates the belief that claims of discrimination are de facto invalid because America has transcended racial categories. Further, the assertion of continued race and gender discrimination is an incitement of already resolved tensions within the nation. Reraising “the race question” or the “gender question” is not only contrary to the discourse of the post era but also evidence of failure to comport with the social, political, and economic commitments of American citizenship and civic responsibility.

In the remainder of this article, I examine examples of racechange in high fashion across a variety of texts, revealing that visual deployment of postracial ideology is much more prevalent and insidious than even the studies of Joseph and Hasinoff suggest. Specifically, bodies of color are no longer socially or politically notable because race is no longer a category of exclusion but a depoliticized accessory.

Indeed, racial performance on its face suggests a “putting on” and “taking off” of race that separates the wearable elements of identity from their material implications and reinforces whiteness through equal treatment of White and non-White models. Further, moments of racechange invite the audience to gaze at difference in the guise of appreciation while, in actuality, objectifying and rendering passive those models who portray snapshotted racial moments. High fashion thus leaves race unintelligible: Instead of being a signifier of particular histories and conditions, race is reduced to crude material components, that is, makeup, cloth, and wigs, which work as physical means of deconstructing antiracist activism. More simply, the belief that race no longer functions to oppress and is instead an element of fashion preemptively denies claims of racial discrimination. In essence, racechange in high fashion celebrates the esthetic appeal of race thereby suggesting that those who are different are now “in the club,” so to speak, and claims of inequality are no longer cognizable. In touting the beauty of racial difference, racechange in high fashion operates to negate acts of rhetorical agency which advocate racial identity politics.

Accessorizing with race

The cover of the Winter 2009/2010 issue of *V Magazine* features Natalie Portman, in punk rock style, posed between the two arms of an enormous, hot pink letter “V.” She exudes sexuality with her smoky eye makeup, gelled hair, and open mouth. Portman’s edgy look conveys the vibe of the publication as hip, progressive, intellectual, and high fashion. The byline of BEAUTY 2010, the spread in *V Magazine* that contains images of racial performance, tells the reader “We asked the world’s leading creative directors, makeup artists, and hairstylists to define what’s beautiful for the new decade 2010 sounds like the future and this is what it will look like.” Ten pages of responses to *V Magazine*’s prompt follow, offering cliché statements on beauty from the perspectives of individuals working in the fashion industry. For example, Christophe de Lataillade, Creative Director for Thierry Mugler Parfums, comments that “beauty lies in personality,” while James Gager, SVP and Creative Director for M.A.C. Cosmetics Worldwide observes that “beauty in 2010 will focus less on the external and more on the internal.” Drawing attention to the implications of race for beauty, the center spread of Beauty 2010 features a photograph of a White model, who was competing on *ANTM* at the time, in blackface and a White model in her own skin, both nude and “in an amorous embrace” (Kenney, 2009). The image representing the statement of James Kaliardos, Creative Director for L’Oreal Paris International, is captioned: “Black is the new Black.” Though women of color appear in other parts of the Winter 2009/2010 issue of *V Magazine* and even BEAUTY 2010, the beauty of blackness is conveyed by two White women, one of whom exclusively wears black—black makeup that is, and nothing else (Figure 1).

The *V Magazine* spread raises a number of questions about racechange in high fashion and its attendant implications on rhetorical agency. Initially, through the description “Black is the new Black,” racial identity is reinterpreted, transformed



Figure 1 Two models illustrate that “Black is the new Black.” *V Magazine* 62 (2009).

from a socially and politically significant category to a postracial accessory that can be put on and taken off at will. The phrase has two implications, first suggesting blackness, that is, the identity category, as a classic fashion choice that will “go with anything” and second, suggesting that Black has replaced black as the perfect addition to any ensemble. The selection of a White model to convey the beauty of blackness demonstrates the transformation of race into an esthetically pleasing accessory: Despite her racial identity, the model is able to “put on” Black, just as she would adorn herself with a piece of jewelry or lipstick. Read in the context of scholarship on rhetorical agency, the act of “putting on Black” creates a rhetorical situation in which race is understood as a negotiable esthetic category. Accordingly, *V Magazine* and racechange in high fashion generally alters the landscape of rhetorical agency by authorizing those who wear blackness to claim knowledge of the experience of being a minority and silencing those who assert that racial identity fundamentally transforms social experience. In short, racial performance in high fashion contributes to the production of a rhetorical situation in which race is labeled as an element of beauty but not a significant identity category.

Examples of racechange in fashion are also postracial manifestations of Arjun Appadurai’s “aesthetics of decontextualization.” Appadurai (1986) uses the concept to critique the removal of cultural objects from their original contexts and their reinterpretation and recontextualization within Western institutions and economies (p. 28). Two underlying concerns are apparent in Appadurai’s critique. First, the aesthetics of decontextualization operates to sever the links between cultural objects and their histories, appropriating them as fashion and display to provide evidence of exoticness. Second, the trade of appropriated cultural objects fosters commodification of the exotic. A process which Graham Huggan (2001) argues results in fetishization and distancing from Otherness instead of cultural engagement (p. 17).³ In the context of the *V Magazine* spread, identity itself is objectified and decontextualized—blackness is defined in terms of fashionability, commodified, and

rendered saleable. The embrace of racechange in fashion generally demonstrates the high fashion industry's belief in the myth of postraciality: Only in a world in which race has been adequately divorced from its former social and political baggage can it be estheticized and worn.

The second issue that arises from the slogan "Black is the new Black" emerges from the replacing black with Black. The notion of the "new Black" highlights the inherently fad-driven nature of the fashion industry. The phrase "X is the new Black" in itself indicates that trends change, varying based on time and place. As a result blackness can be replaced—in other words, Black is only the new black until it is out of fashion, an inevitability in a fashion system driven by the need to constantly provide new commodities to consumers (Baudrillard, 1981; p. 79). Yet this fashion system also guarantees the eventual categorization of blackness as out of fashion, passé, and even ugly. "Black is the new Black" is an ideological statement—and in this case, fashion invokes narratives of postraciality. Blackness is only "wearable" because we have entered an historical moment in which White bodies and Black bodies are purportedly equal and the act of "putting on" blackness is somehow distinct and divorced from the racist deployment of blackface minstrelsy and racial performances in decades past (Givhan, 2011). The eventual unfashionability of blackness operates as a constraint on rhetorical agency as well. As racechange falls out of fashion, so too does the acceptance of difference. Yet because the wearing of race is accompanied by a belief in postracial ideology, attempts by marginalized groups to repoliticize race and renew fights for political equality will likely fail, constraining the rhetorical agency of those individuals.

In the Cycle 13 episode of *ANTM*, "Let's Go Surfing," which aired in 2009, the remaining competitors are transported to Hawai'i where the show's host, internationally renowned supermodel Tyra Banks, stands in front of a sugarcane field under bright blue skies. Cohost Mr. Jay begins outlining the photoshoot, explaining: "Once the Hawaiians started growing sugarcane commercially, they realized they needed a larger workforce. So as a result people from all over the world and different countries emigrated here to get jobs." Banks chimes in asking "what happens when men and women from different places come together?" She screams excitedly, "Babies! Lots of babies that are from different cultures. A mix." Mr. Jay calls out "[a]nd its called what?" to which Banks shrieks "Hapa! Hapa means half in Hawai'ian! Do you guys know the most famous hapa in the world? President Barack Obama!" Mr. Jay concludes, explaining in a manner that highlights the show's simultaneous and inconsistent invocation of the myth of postraciality and the belief in the validity of grouping humans based on their social and biological differences, that the models will be transformed into "two very different, distinct races." Banks offers a caveat, stating: "Every outfit is not necessarily of what that culture is wearing now. It might not even be a necessary exact of what they've worn in the past. It's a fashion interpretation of it."⁴

The models are then dressed as "mixed races" representing individuals who are Native American and East Indian, Polynesian and Botswanan, and Mexican



Figure 2 Models on *ANTM* dress up as “distinct races.” *America’s Next Top Model* (2009).

and Greek, among others (Figure 2). The “fashion interpretations” are reduced to material markers of race, for example, skin color, clothing, and stereotypical racial identity—insofar as the models attempt to pose to capture the mythical identity or ethos of the groups they are representing racial identity vis-à-vis crude markers of race. For example, the model tasked with being a Native American/East Indian wears a sari, bindi, and headdress. Her costuming prompts a particular performance of race: She stands tall in order to authentically illustrate Native American pride. Along the same lines, when a model expresses a lack of knowledge about Tibet, Banks helpfully reminds her of spirituality and the Dalai Lama. The move to represent race through fashion thus becomes a highly reductive one, concerned with the esthetics of race and a barely stereotypical knowledge of the represented groups. Race becomes nothing more than a collection of material pieces, in both the sense of physical and constituent part, combined with face paint. The knowledge, or lack of knowledge in this case, of race expressed on television also becomes a rhetorical constraint. Race is understood in such a superficial manner that attempts to speak to the social and political implications of the category become de facto problematic.

Cycle 13’s deployment of racial transformation is not the first in *ANTM* history. *ANTM* first introduced racechange in 2004, albeit in a not particularly grand form, in Cycle 2. The models were dressed as celebrities—one woman, who was to be made up as Grace Jones, initially wept at being forced to pose in ugly, thick, dark makeup. While not every *ANTM* cycle has involved full makeup, the show has featured a veritable potpourri of racial transformations: Cycle 3 featured the models in full Geisha attire, Cycle 4 featured the models dressed as “other races” in “Got Milk?” advertisements, and Cycle 5 placed the models in Bollywood attire. The trend continued in subsequent cycles with a parade of Spanish bullfighters, aboriginal dancers, Ellis Island immigrants, Carmen Mirandas, ninjas, hapas, and fashion designers. Yet despite *ANTM*’s consistent use of transracial performances, the practice did not catch on, either in terms of appearing in other fashion magazines

or receiving significant media attention, until after the 2008 election of President Obama.

Banks's invocation of discourses of postraciality, in specific reference to President Obama, is a potent example of the manner in which the belief that America has moved "beyond race" has inspired racechange fashion and constrained rhetorical agency. I focus on "Let's Go Surfing" because it is contemporaneous with other examples of racechange in high fashion and quite explicit in its invocations of postracial ideology. Banks simultaneously calls upon President Obama, who is a symbol of American transcendence of race by virtue of his status as the nation's first Black leader, and recounts a highly edited and whitewashed history of Hawai'i. In Banks's tale, even in a nation generally filled with racial divisiveness, Hawai'i's indigenous racial mixing is the path to the attainment of racial paradise and the peaceful coexistence of difference. Set against the visual backdrop of Hawai'i's bright blue skies and oceans and green sugarcane fields, the conversation between Banks and Mr. Jay evokes the feeling of a postracial utopia in which even those of "two very different, distinct races" can coexist. Even the broader progression of *ANTM* over its 13 cycles suggests the genesis of this postracial utopia: Loyal viewers have watched the show's original racechange, a tearful, traumatic transformation in Cycle 2, give way to a relatively complex, mature, and dignified racial performance set against the backdrop of an island paradise. *ANTM*'s own models have played the part of the postracial converts through their newfound pride and respect for their fictional, mixed identities and acceptance of even those individuals who were previously not "in fashion."

Also notable is *ANTM*'s willingness to transform models of any race into any other race. Over the course of the series, models of all colors have been transformed into models of all colors. In "Let's Go Surfing," for example, six models are made up as different races. Four of those models are White, one is Asian, and one is Black. The move to make up non-White models as different races is a means of advancing postracial ideology by equating all racial identities and affording a privilege that has traditionally only been afforded to Whites, that is, the selective wearing of race, to all non-Whites. Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek (1995) note that race and ethnicity are not significant in the everyday lives of those who are White. Instead, they can be donned at will, through the wearing of racially and ethnically specific objects. Whites are empowered to engage in "symbolic ethnicity," picking and choosing when and how they will engage their racial and ethnic identities while non-Whites live with the constant implications of their skin colors (p. 302). The racial transformations that occur on *ANTM* are thus problematic in two ways. First, they perpetuate the myth of postraciality by bestowing on non-Whites a privilege that has traditionally been afforded only to Whites—that is, the unfettered ability to put on and take off racial and ethnic identities creating the illusion that there is no need to be concerned with the material consequences of race (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, pp. 295, 300–301). Second, they simultaneously deride difference, permitting, as Joseph and Hasinoff point out, only those looks which are not "too exotic." The effect of racechange in fashion, then, is to delegitimize the identification of race as an axis of inequality

while centering whiteness through a form of privilege, that is, the ability to “put on” and “take off” race at will, which is now afforded to non-Whites by Whites. In this context, like the other contexts described above, and despite the influence of Banks in the *ANTM*'s production, an underlying White disciplinarity controls the framing of race, and hence the constraints within which marginalized groups can exercise their rhetorical agency.

Tourism for the postracial era

The October 2009 issue of *Vogue Paris* highlights the underrepresentation of Black models in the fashion industry by photographing Dutch supermodel Lara Stone in blackface. Stone, painted in a thick layer of chocolate brown makeup, poses in clothing described by commentators as “African-inspired.” In one image, she sits with her legs open, looking down at the camera, her hand provocatively placed on her white-stocking-clad inner thigh (Figure 3). In a second photograph, her whole body is covered in layers of ornate cloth suggesting African royalty (Figure 4). The final photograph presents Stone in a white feathered dress with a large black headdress, full-length black gloves, and a baton. *Vogue Paris* offers no explanation for its representations of a well-known White model in blackface and culturally inspired costuming instead of a Black model wearing her own face (Belknap, 2009). However, even French publications have touted the images of Stone in blackface as one of the top 10 greatest fashion scandals of all time (News de Stars, 2011).

The photographs of Stone also are representative of a larger trend in racechange in high fashion of embracing a neocolonialist, tourist gaze. Lagerfeld's film, *Vogue Paris*, and *ANTM*, with their race-of-the-week photo shoots and “grazing mentality” typify both the desire to commodify exotic identities and momentarily consume difference without true engagement with difference (Franklin, 2003, p. 208). The spread in *Vogue Paris* asks the viewer to take in Stone wearing clothing that imagines African royalty gone dominatrix (Figure 3). Stone, who gazes directly at the viewer with a powerful, penetrating stare, and open legs conjures the stereotype of the hypersexualized and promiscuous Black woman over which “White men could exercise their property rights” (Smith, 1998, p. 2). Moreover, the reduction of an entire continent to a few pieces of apparel constructs a homogenized Africa, erasing difference and reconstructing a troubling memory of an imperial past (Loomba, 2005, p. 19).⁵ And while it is possible to argue that Stone gazes directly at the viewer, claiming her femininity, she does so with her legs spread open. Stone is a passive, sexualized, stereotyped racial figure, not an emblem of empowerment (Figure 4). Just as *Vogue Paris* invokes fantasies of African imperialism, *ANTM* expects models to take on the racial or ethnic identity deemed fashionable by the episode. In another example of donning the difference of the week, Lagerfeld literally transports his viewers to another time and place, depicting in film a fictitious journey in which fashion icon Coco Chanel visits different eras in Chinese history. In just three examples, we have traversed almost the entire globe and multiple historical periods,



Figure 3 Lara Stone in eroticized “African-inspired” garb. *Vogue Paris* 62 (2009).

resting in one place for no more than a few images. Moreover, in each of these examples, the rhetorical agency of the racial minority is subordinated to imperial fantasy, which in turn operates as a means of limiting the retelling of narratives of racial oppression. Because we do not rest in one place for longer than a moment or inquire into the conditions surrounding exotic high-fashion images, the racial identities that are represented are silenced not empowered.

In wording eerily reminiscent of the title and content of the *ANTM* episode discussed here, Nakamura (1996) describes identity tourism in cyberspace as “a form of travel which is inherently recreational, exotic, and exciting, like surfing.” Racechange in fashion fills a similar role, engaging the desire to momentarily inhabit and aestheticize difference in an attempt to keep the attention of the metaphorical tourist. Jane Desmond (1999), in discussing tourism in Hawai’i, offers a useful framework for reading racechange in high fashion. Desmond offers three overlapping concepts for understanding the tourist experience. First, tourists are voyeurs: They are concerned only with the pleasurable consumption of difference (1999, p. 281). Second, they consume only static esthetics of beauty, mediated through the lens of whiteness and colonial history. Third, they are concerned with spectacular body or the sights, sounds, and motions of the dehistoricized body (1999, p. xvi). Significantly, the tourist frame does not merely describe commercial activities, but also ideological ones, such as those related to postcoloniality (Desmond, 1999, p. xvii). C. Michael Hall and Michael Tucker observe: “Tourism both reinforces and is embedded in postcolonial relationships. Issues of identity, contestation, and representation are increasingly recognized as central to the nature of tourism” (2004, p. 2). Moreover,



Figure 4 Vogue Paris’s interpretation of African royalty. *Vogue Paris* 62 (2009).

in this postracial moment, the “tourist gaze” (Urry, 2002) has pervasive impacts on the meaning of racechange as performed and enacted through fashion and the structuring of contemporary social and political relationships, and hence rhetorical agency.

Desmond defines voyeurism as “a pleasure in the consumption of difference” (1999, p. 281). Voyeuristic tourism thus functions as a narrowing frame, eliminating from the photo that which is not pleasurable to consume: “The world is divided up into those places where tourists are carefully ushered into and through, and those places they are prevented from seeing. Tourists only flow into *certain* places” (Franklin, 2003, p. 207). The tourist gaze functions from the outside, taking in parts of the exotic culture, often divorcing images from their contexts and histories. Because of the fleeting and noncommittal nature of the tourist enterprise, a neocolonial relationship arises. The culture being toured must provide the expected attractions with no expectation of return (Franklin, 2003, p. 207). Voyeurism also has explicitly neocolonial and racial undertones. Outsiders may take difference as they please to enrich their own cultural knowledge and worldly experiences. Functioning as a transracial tourist, the *performer* of racechange takes in a small piece of the Other while synecdochally substituting that subset for the whole. Similarly, the *audience* views the performance of race, consuming inauthentic Otherness through the lens of another identity. Rhetorical agency rests not with the model but the audience who

enjoys the racial performance and touristic moment that unfolds in the scenes of high-fashion magazines and television shows.

Static esthetics operate to memorialize the climax of a performance (1999, p. 231). Thus, they implicate both the politics of representation and time. Racechange in high fashion calls upon both of these aspects of static esthetics, memorializing certain races, elements of dress taken from particular moments in history, which may or may not currently be accurate. Racial performance in high fashion seeks to freeze particular, esthetically pleasing moments of cultural processes, refusing the mercurial nature of difference (Johnson, 2003). In addition, in the context of racechange, the static esthetic takes on an additional meaning as beauty is consistently represented through the lens of whiteness. The high-fashion industry's standards of attractiveness are superimposed onto racial Others, suggesting that beauty is both universal and unchanging. Accordingly, transracial performances in fashion do not celebrate the beauty of the body of color from within; they are imposed from the outside. Racechange allows for the artificial simulation of color from within the safe space of whiteness, recreating perceived visions of authenticity. Racechange thus enacts a *physical* colonialization as well as a *conceptual* one. Physically, Otherness is occupied by individuals of different ethnicities. Conceptually, the ideals of beauty as related to difference are obliterated by way of the performance of race through the lens of White esthetics.

Finally, Desmond defines the tourist as concerned with the spectacle or “an emphasis on sights, sounds, and motion—replaces narrative and with it the possibility of historical reflection” (Desmond, 1999, p. xvi). Representations of racechange in the context of fashion create an illusion of engagement with difference while actually encouraging passive consumption of images that are read as “signs of what the tourist audience believes them to be” (Desmond, 1999, p. xx). Spectacular corporeality also separates the body from its historical narrative. Instead of connecting race to its historical material consequences, the emphasis on the spectacle treats racial identity as a mere visual, a sight that is placed within a landscape for the purposes of tourist consumption. Much like voyeuristic consumption, spectacular corporeality creates a neocolonial relationship that encourages “eating the Other” (hooks, 1992). Images of racechange accompanied by hip catchphrases foster a false sense of engagement as well as belief in the ahistoricity of race. Moreover, just as blackface minstrelsy suggested both loathing and longing for Black culture, racechange in high fashion represents both difference-induced anxiety and longing for Otherness, both of which draw upon the mythos of racialized desire (Lott, 1995).

Lagerfeld's Pre-Fall 2009 Chanel fashion show in Shanghai, China engages in a similar tourist gaze. In his approximately 25-minute film, *Paris-Shanghai: A Fantasy*, Lagerfeld tells the story of “The trip Coco Chanel only made in her dreams.” After a short introductory vignette, we see Chanel falling asleep on her couch and we are taken into her dream of a time-traveling tour of China. In the first scene, set in 1960s Shanghai, Chanel literally engages in voyeurism, peeking through a dirty window into a small, dark room. She opens the door to the room, entering a largely



Figure 5 Karl Lagerfeld imagines a Chinese gambling room. *Paris-Shanghai: A Fantasy* (2009). Retrieved from <http://www.journaldesfemmes.com/luxe/haute-couture/photo/le-voyage-reve-de-coco-chanel/dans-les-fastes-du-palais-imperial.shtml>

bare, barrack-like home where she meets a Chinese man and woman, portrayed by models in yellowface. The forlorn peasants, who wear Mao-era jackets, welcome Chanel in. She offers them perfume and hand-sewn apparel which they gleefully take, giving her their warm jackets in exchange. Moments later, we are transported to the dressing room of a nightclub in 1920s Shanghai where a young Chanel gives fashion advice to Marlene Dietrich. In the next vignette, we see Chanel in a train car populated by extraordinarily tall models in yellowface, with thick eyebrows, painted on eyelashes, and long earrings. Chanel's glass compartment allows her to see all around her, while Chinese characters wander around in roles of service or subservience.

We are then in a gambling room filled with Chinese men and women with long thin mustaches and goatees. Chanel sits at a table with a female companion where the two reenact a series of Orientalist stereotypes. Two very tall Chinese women with their hair piled atop their heads enter the room, the camera following them in (Figure 5). The companion says, "You see this one sitting down? She is the most expensive in Shanghai. And the other, she is the most famous madam." Chanel asks how much opium the Chinese smoke. Her companion says that they do not talk about such things because the walls have ears and eyes. In the final vignette, we are transported to Imperial Court Shanghai. As Chanel stands before her, the Empress of China whispers, "The Empress of China is happy to grant the Queen of Fashion an audience." Before we return to Chanel awaking on her sofa, the Empress's son moves from his throne, embraces Chanel and whispers in her ear: "Historical details are unimportant. All this is just a dream" (Figure 6).

In Lagerfeld's film, Chanel is a literal tourist, stopping in carefully selected historical moments and places in Chinese history to take in the cultural surroundings she wished she had seen in her lifetime. From the beginning of the film, we are aware



Figure 6 Lagerfeld's representation of Imperial China. *Paris-Shanghai: A Fantasy* (2009). Retrieved from <http://www.journaldesfemmes.com/luxe/haute-couture/photo/le-voyage-reve-de-coco-chanel/un-jeune-empereur.shtml>



Figure 7 Coco Chanel introduces Maoist China to her fashions. *Paris-Shanghai: A Fantasy* (2009). Retrieved from <http://www.journaldesfemmes.com/luxe/haute-couture/photo/le-voyage-reve-de-coco-chanel/confrontation-des-univers.shtml>

that she is the protagonist and the models in yellowface around her will fawn over her and cater to her desires. Chinese history exists only as inspiration for Chanel's fashionable inspirations and the vignettes we see provide only momentary looks into the lives of China's inhabitants: Maoist China is only distinguished from the Imperial

Court in order to identify clothing inspirations not to dissect the historical contexts in which the events told unfolded (Figure 7). The film's scenes occur in single rooms, cut off from the historical contexts around them and the Empress's son goes so far as to tell us that historical details are "unimportant." Lagerfeld expresses this view himself in an interview in which he states that he is interested in creating "an homage to Europeans trying to look Chinese . . . Like in 'The Good Earth . . . or . . . 'Madame Butterfly'" and focusing on "the idea of China" (Odell, 2009). Lagerfeld's film is indeed a shorthand of China—peasant barracks, a nightclub dressing room, a train, a gambling room, and an Imperial Court—that substitutes scenes familiar to the Western imagination for particular moments in the nation's long history. The images enact a colonial past, a time in which China was beholden to the West and exchange occurred in one direction. The enactment of Chineseness through yellowface completes this image. Once again, the tourist gaze has visually colonized China, presenting its people through the lens of White beauty or as spectacular bodies in particular historical moments.

Vogue Paris reduces the royalty of an entire continent to three striking images, creating an illusion of historical understanding through the presentation of the body as spectacle. Nonetheless, the magazine's engagement with African royalty is based on a fashion-interpretation of a single moment in history, universalized to an entire continent across time. Tall, tiny-waisted Lara Stone provides the canvas for the presentation of Africanness: Her model physique remains the basis for describing blackness. *ANTM* takes a similar approach. Banks constructs a Hawai'i that lacks history but is inhabited by individuals who have transcended race. As far as we know, Hawai'i is a place of blue skies, lush vegetation, stunning oceans, and racial harmony. Numerous scholars, including Desmond, have pointed out the ways in which representations of Hawai'i as island paradise function as neocolonial enterprise, privileging a particular understanding of the state that deemphasizes its traumatic past (Desmond, 1999; Chou & Feagin, 2008, pp. 158–159). Banks's stroll through the virtually uninhabited Hawai'ian landscape and retelling of the state's history demonstrate her insistence on creating a spectacle, though in this case that trope does not involve physical bodies. Banks constructs Hawai'i in a manner that tourists encounter, that is, beautiful landscapes, surfing, and separation from Hawai'i's historical past. The history she tells is one which renders Hawai'i's geography, economies, and racial makeup ahistorical. The sugar cane plantations, once a site of racialized economic exploitation, are reduced to backdrop, deemphasized from view. Indeed, this reduction of sugarcane to mere background is consistent with the questionable history Banks tells. Banks uses the term hapa without acknowledging its historically negative connotations with unsanctioned racial mixing and screams happily about babies that were often products of colonialism and exploitation, not free emigration (Chou & Feagin, 2008).

Banks also detracts attention from Hawai'ians that live on the island, focusing instead on the overachieving model minority from the state. Obama serves a metonymic function. His narrative and history becomes representative of all

Hawai'ians and his privilege overshadows other experiences of Hawai'ianness. Obama, of course, could not be a more consumable or palatable image of difference. Elected president, he represents mainstream American and, relative to native Hawai'ians, the minimization of difference. That is not to say that Obama is not a symbol of difference in America, just that relative to the spectrum of difference, he is less threatening than many other real or imagined Black men.

The episode's transracial performances enact a static esthetic. The audience is led through the world's "races," a word that Banks uses to refer to national identity and ethnicity, using "a fashion interpretation." Banks provides a quick overview of the "race" to be reproduced for models that are not familiar. She creates a unidimensional and stereotypical visual and verbal portrait. For example, the "Indian/Indian" representation depicts a woman wearing a sari, bindi, and headdress and Banks instructs one model to be "Tibetan, like the Dalai Lama." The model responds, "I don't know anything about Tibet. I have very vague knowledge of Tibet, except that it needs to be freed." Mr. Jay later chimes in that the Tibetan people are "all about ritual." Botswana is transformed into a drumbeat that is heard everywhere. Beauty is visually and linguistically understood through particular snapshots—leadership, spirituality, and ritual—as opposed to any lasting engagement. Moreover, difference is represented through the lens of fashion, altered in fundamental ways. And, in a final hallmark of the tourist encounter, the engagement with difference does not last long. The short duration of the tourist interaction and tenuous relationship to difference is highlighted by the comment of one model: "It's gonna suck to have to scrub [the makeup] off later." In other words, the foray into other "races" is a temporary one, a means of momentarily embodying difference.

Reclaiming rhetorical agency and racial identity

A number of scholars have suggested that racial performance offers the possibilities for transformation, showcasing difference in emancipatory ways and bridging gaps between Whiteness and Otherness (Lott, 1995; Kondo, 1997; Kondo, 2000; Gubar, 2000). Dorinne Kondo, for example, focuses on the possibility of Japanese avant garde fashion and documentary theater in retelling social and political histories of race. Japanese fashion embraces Asian physique as inspiration for high fashion, reconfiguring beauty and operating as "implicit critique of Eurocentrism" as opposed to "some inadequate imitation of Western ideals" (Kondo, 1997, pp. 118, 122). Racial performance becomes transformative through the mechanisms of reconfigured histories, renarrated understandings of national identity, and problematized notions of the stable subject. Kondo's argument, however, presupposes a contextualization of race and its histories as opposed to the esthetics of decontextualization Appadurai describes. Bruner articulates similar possibilities for resistance in the realm of tourism. For him, an audience that approaches the tourist display with a "questioning gaze" can resist fantasies, seemingly through the exercise of rhetorical agency. Nonetheless

Bruner himself identifies difficulties with depending on this position as a site of resistance to troubling images: “[t]he questioning gaze may be pushed aside, so that tourists may delight in . . . the colonial slot into which they are being positioned” (2001, p. 901). The temptation is thus great for even the most critical tourists to become immersed in spectacle.

Racechange in high fashion, however, operates as a means of preempting anti-racist common sense and instead creating new modes of inferential racism through postracial ideology. Understood in the context of rhetorical agency, such preemptions implicate the limits within which resistance can be articulated. The delinking of racial identity from its historical formation and material realities requires those objecting to the myth of postraciality to reassert contexts and significances, effectually reproving the existence of racism. Representations of racechange in high fashion thus construct a racist common sense which presupposes that assertions about the need to talk about race and its effects are invalid. Similarly, the recreation of tourist encounters in high fashion creates an implied structure in which models are objects on display, not rhetors empowered to speak, especially against postracial ideology. As Bruner suggests, leaving the audience, in this case those who have been indoctrinated into the racist common sense of postraciality, with the sole ability to engage such representations with a questioning gaze is problematic at best. The deployment of racechange in high fashion thus implicates body politics, in two senses. First, body politics suggests the regulation of the *physical body*. Consistent with the discussion of Foucault and disciplinary power, racial performance circumscribes the boundaries of rhetorical agency, simultaneously producing visual and discursive regimes of postraciality and foreclosing discussions of the implications of the raced body. Second, body politics connotes a *political body*, here the American public. Visual rhetorics of fashion operate, as Hariman and Lucaites (2007) argue of iconic photographs, as mechanisms for articulating citizenship in the nation. Racechange in high fashion suggests that the true citizen is one who exhibits qualities of racial flexibility and acceptance of postideology. Those who refuse the politics of the body are expelled from the political body, represented on *ANTM* by the act of being sent home. Refusing the myth of postraciality, then, marks individuals for exclusion, it does not empower them to speak.

I am not suggesting that the modes of resistance through racechange are impossibilities. However, given the current tendency in the United States to valorize postraciality, such endeavors are fraught with difficulties. Perhaps more importantly, racial performances in high fashion demonstrate an underlying racial common sense that privileges the ideology of postraciality over that of racial equality. Yet while the modes of racial transformation that Kondo and others describe are certainly powerful within their own contexts, they are dramatically different from those representations offered by high fashion and the popular media. The challenge for advocates of antiracist common sense in an era of postracial ideology is to negotiate new limits for rhetorical agency that resist those representations and reclaim and reinterpret disciplinary discourses.

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Notes

- 1 Even the most international of these examples, namely Lagerfeld's films and *Vogue Paris* (Paris), have been featured prominently in high-profile U.S. publications such as the *New York Times*, the *Huffington Post*, and *W Magazine* and circulated on American blogs because of their association with global brands. In other words, they have become a part of the lexicon of American popular culture.
- 2 Gubar (2000) defines racechange as a more than mimetic process that suggests "the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black posing as white, pan-racial mutuality" (p. 5). Racial performance is "an extravagant esthetic construction that functions self-reflexively to comment on representation in general" (pp. 10–11). While Gubar understands racechange to be a potentially liberatory means by which individuals can "enact or envision postracist ways of thinking or being" (p. 241), her definition does not necessitate such a conclusion. I use the term racechange to suggest more than mimesis and commentary on representation. Racechange, as I read it, suggests an ideological depth to racial performance, a layer of meaning to be explored and untangled.
- 3 The work of Appadurai and Huggan is also useful in considering the issue of whether *any* diverse faces, whether "real" or not, are a step forward for fashion. While the path to racial equality is a difficult one, fraught with obstacles, I understand racial performance in high fashion as neither a step forward nor backward but a continuation of age-old ideologies of colonial and capitalist appropriation of difference. Indeed, even those who ardently believe in the resistive potential of racial performance, some of whose work I discuss later in this article, suggest that there is a significant distinction between the utilitarian deployment of difference in the context of fashion and the creation of new forms of expression which truly allow marginalized groups to speak.
- 4 Interestingly, Banks recently apologized for the potentially offensive theme of the most recent episode of *ANTM*, stating that she intended to "stretch the definition of beauty" as opposed to offend her audience (Oliver, 2009). However, that did not stop her from using racechange performances in photoshoots in subsequent cycles of the show.
- 5 Admittedly, the homogenization of "Africa" into a single unified space is a problem throughout the fashion industry, where the term "African-inspired" seems commonplace (Stoppard, 2012).

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