

FASHION

AS WE KNOW IT

An analysis of the ways in which societal advantages have been favored over fierce diligence.

(through the eyes of an 18-year old Latino from the Bronx)

Experienced, written, and shared by
Jonathan Hodge

An Acknowledgement.

On Monday, May 25th, 2020 a little after 8:00 PM CDT, George Floyd--an unarmed black man in Minneapolis--took his last breath. His death, caused by the hands of a Minnesota police officer, reemphasized the need for human rights for the people of color that are constantly being eradicated by the hands of the oppressor. As a nation, we are expected to stand together as one. During times like these, however, our division could not be any clearer. Racial injustice continues to be the biggest weapon used against us. Communities have had to come together to rally the senseless and premature loss of mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, sons, daughters (and beyond!) for far too long now. 2020 has shown the world that the people of color who continuously fight the fight have one clear message: that acknowledgment is a must, and accountability needs to start. Now.

As we journey on into the future, we bring with us the invaluable work that people have done to break molds within different societal systems. We have created social media blackouts, advanced in solidarity, exposed racist agendas--but still, the fight continues. I release this paper in hopes to continue to bring the fight to spaces where racism continues to be embedded in the most. The fashion industry could be viewed as one of the top leading influences behind the societal standards that exist today which perpetuate notions of innocence and beauty, while instituting criminalization based on appearance. It is time for every fashion agent, retailer, designer, photographer, assistant, executive to step up and get to work. This paper is dedicated to victims of racial injustice in America. To the hope of not ever having to hear "I can't breathe" again. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Ezell Ford, Dante Parker, Tanisha Anderson, Tamir Rice, Natasha McKenna, Sandra Bland, Albert Joseph Davis, Sandra Bland, Jamar Clark, Richard Perkins, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Alteria Woods, Aaron Bailey, Stephon Clark, Antwon Rose II, Dominique Clayton, Atatiana Jefferson, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd.

pre·judg·ment

/prējəjmənt/

an opinion about a situation or a person that is formed before knowing or considering all of the facts.



When asked what fashion means to her, Pulitzer Award-winning African American fashion critic Robin Givhan responded with the following:

“ OVER THE COURSE OF THE YEARS, I’VE LEARNED [THAT] FASHION IS A FASCINATING BUSINESS ABOUT SELLING MAGIC. IT IS DONE ON THE BACKS OF OUR OPTIMISM AND OUR INSECURITY. IT IS AS MUCH PSYCHOLOGY AS COMMERCE. BUT I’VE ALSO LEARNED THAT EVERY DAY WE MAKE SPLIT SECOND DECISIONS ABOUT PEOPLE BASED ON THEIR ATTIRE AND THOSE DECISIONS CAN HAVE POWERFUL IMPLICATIONS – SEE THE STORY OF TRAYVON MARTIN AND HIS HOODIE. IT’S IMPORTANT FOR US TO UNDERSTAND HOW FASHION WORKS AND HOW WE CONNECT TO IT. ”

It must've been during my second year of high school that I truly began to give thought to the importance of how one delivers and presents themselves. I was at a point in time where (naturally) my peers began to familiarize one another with who we were and where we came from, and I had begun to do the same with them. The apprehension that resided among us eventually developed into cognizance of what we would deem as everyone's virtues and perfections, at least the ones that we could outwardly pick up on. Before we knew it, our pubescent subconscious formed a perception of the character of everyone around us. Of course, this tied into the ways in which I myself could have treated (and may continue to treat) my friends, family, peers, and strangers.

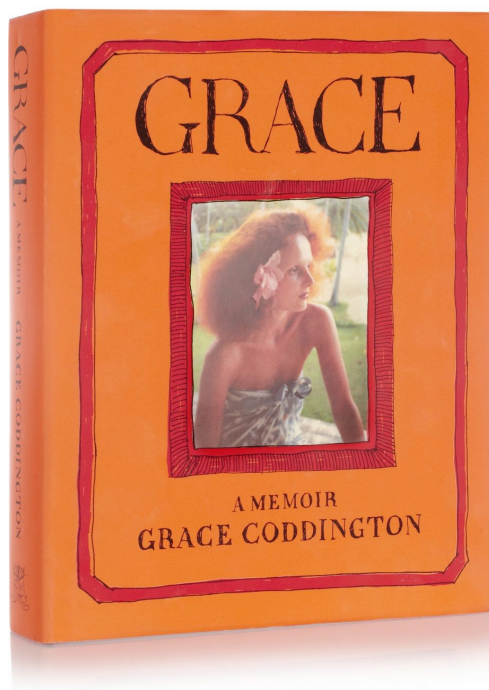
My time in high school was in a space that proudly celebrated diversity, and promised to nourish any adversities, together. While I can't say that things were horrible, I did have to do the work of processing several instances of microaggressions on my own throughout the years. In many cases, the work itself is what bonded me to many other students of color in my school who shared similar frustrating and uncomfortable moments like I did. Granted, I attended a private institution located in a posh area of Lower Manhattan in New York City; and the education that I received introduced me to a world of *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison, and Spike Lee, to name a few. This to me facilitated the notion of both systematic and self-exploration. It was exciting to visualize pieces of myself within the pages of *The Bluest Eye* or many personal essays shared in class or written in my journals. To me, it both validated and, in a way, humanized the feelings that for so long I had carried within; anger, fear, self-doubts. I spent some time diving deeper into the many emotions and insecurities bequeathed to me as a consequence of societal expectations.

Having found the material that showed me how to question the systems of oppression that have obstructed me throughout my life, I simultaneously questioned how it has impacted an entity that exists beyond me. The entity, that is, consists of persons of color from big cities or small, queer or straight, past or present. I asked myself, “if I’ve had a door closed on my face for not living in the richest zip code, what about the next person? If I’ve experienced discrimination because of one of my identities, who’s working to ensure that someone in the next generation won’t experience the same?” Honestly, it was unsettling to not have a definite answer to those questions. Coincidentally enough, however, my intriguing worries coincided with a final research project that I had been assigned before my high school graduation. For my senior project, I embarked on a journalistic crusade looking into the lives and careers of a few of the fashion industry’s most eminent and distinguished figures. Interview after interview, articles followed by documentaries, these artists are most commonly asked about their favorite fashion moments, or who wore the best look to the most recent event, rather than their testimonies of having overcome any systemic hurdles thrown their way. It became clear to me that maybe *I* should try and do the work to solve one of the questions that I had at the beginning of the experiment.

In·flu·en·tial

/,ɪnflʊˈen(t)ʃ(ə)l/

someone or something that has an impact or shapes how people act or how things occur.



I was fortunate enough to get my hands on a copy of Creative Director Grace Coddington’s memoir, Grace. Born in 1940’s Wales, Miss. Coddington has created a name for herself through her work as a former model, Creative Director for *Vogue*, and stylings for multiple established and respected publications.

I was thrilled to be able to read her story. It’s figures such as herself that I found most intriguing at some point in time. Here is a woman who is credited for *quite literally* some of the best looks on the cover of *Vogue*, a woman who is going toe-to-toe (or hair strand-to- hair strand) with Wendy’s for the signature red hair look, sitting front row at every Fashion Week show right next to *Vogue*’s Anna Wintour. Yet, still kind enough to smile back to me when she and I would cross paths at

least twice a week on the uptown E train as I made my way to my friend Jaquie's house. As she was a friend in my mind, I would so often dare to quietly say "Good afternoon Miss. Coddington!", careful



enough to not bring in unwanted attention from others as we'd intersect on the streets of Chelsea, New York. She would always respond with a friendly nod and hello.

I knew Miss. Coddington for the same reasons that any other "fashion connoisseur" would know her. I knew she worked with "the best" magazines, I knew

she had a precious collaboration with Louis Vuitton, and again, Anna-freaking-Wintour, I mean helloooo! Her book, however, uncovered another side to the established Miss. Coddington that I humorously thought I knew. She penned moments of her life that were big and small. From her first kiss, to the presence of military men taking over her family's humble Inn when she was a young girl. There was one moment, however, that made me stop dead in my tracks and remind me of the existence of the advantages associated with privilege within the fashion industry. In the fifth chapter of her memoir, Miss. Coddington reminisces on her first fashion trip as an editor for *Vogue* in 1970. "In Wales I had not come across any black people at all," she writes, "so to come across a whole island of them was overwhelming. It was the beginning of a lifelong love affair with the West Indies." This passing detail spoke volumes to me as a Dominican boy from the South Bronx. Granted, the

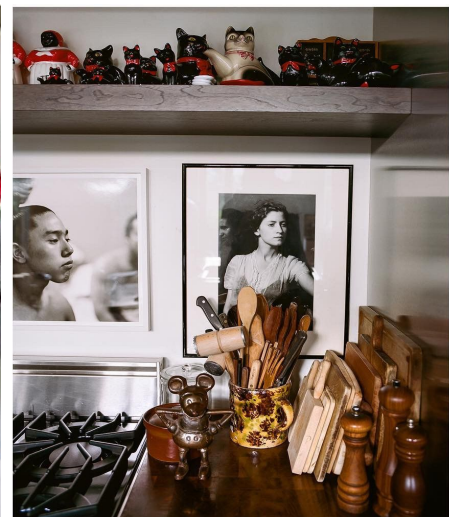
uniformity in homogeneousness in Wales isn't Miss. Coddington's fault at all, but it did make me wonder how aware she was of our people's struggles and treatment in society. I wondered if she had done the work, the same work that I had done as a young boy coming of age as I came to an understanding of my role and perception in society. What I feared the most, though, was the thought of her only experience with people of color at the time was when she'd take their picture on their island and blast them on the pages of a magazine, or better yet, *the* magazine.

Part 3: On Insensitivity

lead·er·ship

/'lɛdər,SHɪp/

an example for others to follow.



The feeling of craving to know more took over me and before I knew it, I was Googling “Grace Coddington race” in hopes of finding God knows what. Nestled between search results was a 2019 article by *The Cut* titled, “Is Fashion Finally Ready to Face Its Blackface Problem?”. Oh-oh. So here’s the “what had happened was.....”. Back in February of 2019, Miss. Coddington posed for a shot of her in her home by photographer Brian Ferry. Upon the release of these images, many people noticed (and called out) the presence of Mammy Jars in her kitchen background. After receiving major backlash from the public, Ferry deleted the post, then reposted with the racist photos excluded. To date, Miss. Coddington has not released any statement, apology, or *acknowledgment* regarding her carelessness and wrongdoings on the Mammy Jars.


Frankly, this isn’t a shock. On the contrary, it’s what I expected to see (sorry, Miss. Coddington)! It isn’t entirely a *gotcha!* moment, but rather a “we know how much insensitivity exists in this industry, let’s acknowledge it and focus on how it has translated into your work” kind of moment. *Tu comprends?* It’s that very same negligence (or careless incognizance) that shows just how undemanding the fashion industry has been in regard to racial accountability and inclusivity. Time after time, some of the most reputable and high-ranking brands have been called out for the release of blatantly-demeaning *coutures*, advertisement campaigns, and treatment of people of color within the workforce (most commonly low-ranking models of color). While many people believe that Miss. Coddington’s Mammy Jar collection should be enough to blacklist her from the industry--an act modernly referred to as *canceling* someone--some argue that situations such as these are to serve as a wakeup call and that her journey towards cultural awareness begins henceforth. Others question if it’s possible to separate the art from the artist. My issue with the matter lies mostly with the fact that she

has yet to address her fault. It's a position that I know could effectively lead me to get *canceled*, as I'd be seen as a person of color letting racism "off the hook". Of course, I *could* shift the focus of this essay onto how her possession of a racist caricature could reflect the work she has done with people of color (or lack thereof). In all honesty, I just think that our situation is much bigger than that.

The idea of opening up the conversation of censorship when it comes to fashion is often received with apprehension. There's the side of fashion that is art; museum exhibits, fantasizing imagery. A world that is all about Alice in Wonderland and fictional paradises of sexuality, fluidity, funkiness, and camp. But then there's the business side of fashion. The side that includes lengthy contracts written up by legal departments outlining budgets and compensation for photoshoots, influencer following markups, and endorsement negotiations. Herein lies the biggest authority of exclusionary forces within fashion. It's these bodies that in one way or another create a united agreement amongst fashion corporate that regulate over what will be accepted, dismissed, ~~borrowed~~ stolen, or commissioned from communities and cultures of color. While yes, Miss. Coddington undoubtedly added irrevocable injury towards the fight for respect for the Black community in fashion and beyond (and even greater insult by not publicly accepting fault or releasing any sort of apology), removing her from these conversations isn't going to change the cultural norms on a global level in the way that it should.


In fact, the approach that we've seen massive brands such as Gucci take as a form of "damage control" serves as an example as to just how fixable of an issue these race-related controversies are seen. Back in February 2019, Gucci's Creative Director Alessandro Michele came forward to apologize for the release of a turtleneck sweater that resembled blackface caricature. Obviously, whatever board of ethics and diversity (that Gucci should already have as a global mega-corporation) put in place failed to leave such an offensive garment on the cutting board. As a matter of fact, had Gucci been practicing effective cultural and racial awareness, an item such as the aforementioned would've never even been proposed.




Balaclava knit top black 

by Gucci

\$890

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Product details


Style: 548540 X1680 1125

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About the brand 

Editor's Notes 

Questioned on his thoughts on the matter, African American fashion pioneer and longtime Gucci collaborator Dapper Dan stated the following:

"I am a Black man before I am a brand," he wrote. "Another fashion house has gotten it outrageously wrong. There is no excuse nor apology that can erase this kind of insult. The CEO of Gucci has agreed to come from Italy to Harlem this week to meet with me, along with members of the community and other industry leaders. There cannot be inclusivity without accountability. I will hold everyone accountable."

As a response to the backlash, the CEO of Gucci announced that he would personally fly over to Harlem from Italy and give community members and Dapper Dan himself the opportunity to voice their concerns and beliefs with him. Following that meeting, Gucci announced that it will double down on its diversity training, as well as outlined a multicultural scholarship for underprivileged students of color who seek financial assistance in order to pursue their fashion studies for college. Unfortunately, it took a racist blackface turtleneck scandal to push for basic corporate ethics.

Part 4: On Expecting Us to Do the Work

The life and career of Mister André Leon Talley has been a golden and much-needed example of inclusivity and diversity in the fashion world. Known for his eccentric capes and coverings of the Met Gala, this southern figure has reported on *la mode* as Vogue's senior editor, as well as Andy Warhol's Interview magazine, W, Women's Wear Daily, Numero, and countless other publications. In addition to his undisputed knowledge on all things fashion, Mister Leon Talley's legacy also serves as a great embodiment of someone who has reclaimed the injustice, reclaimed the racism, and reclaimed the prejudice cast against them--and showed just how sagacious he was when it came to doing what he loved.



Raised in North Carolina with the shadows of the Jim Crow era upon him, Mister Leon Talley had been educating himself on the art of fashion since he was a young boy. From an early age, if he wasn't scrubbing his grandmother's front porch he was off on the "white side of town" in university libraries educating himself on the greats of fashion, French history, and the work of Ms. Diane Vreeland, one of his biggest inspirations and

mentors. In 1970, Mister Leon Talley graduated from North Carolina Central University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in French Literature. Soon after, he received a scholarship that allowed him to obtain his Master of Arts degree in French Literature at Brown University in 1972. Unquestionably educated, he ventured off to New York City and began by working for Andy Warhol's factory for \$50 a week.

At the same time, Mister Leon Talley began to volunteer for Mrs. Diane Vreeland at the Metropolitan Museum of Arts, an opportunity that catapulted his career and introduced him to a new world of greats. You must understand, at the time, Mrs. Vreeland was extremely recognized for her editorial work in fashion. Not only was she respected, but to work for her---and learn from her--meant a great deal back then. So to have an eccentric queer black southerner under her wing was a sight that not many were used to. What followed after that was access to incredible editorials and fashion houses. With time, Mister Leon Talley was given a seat at every fashion show from New York to Milan to Paris. He was allowed in the circles of the Yves Saint Laurents, the Gallianos, and eventually found his niche with who would now be known as the devil in Prada: Anna Wintour.



It was safe to say that André Leon Talley was on top of the world, rightfully so. He was elected Vogue's editor-at-large from 1998-2013, breaking barriers that very few Black men have done during his time. Then suddenly, Mister Leon Talley stepped down and has assumed smaller positions in fashion. Notably, his Met Gala coverings were scrapped and was replaced with YouTuber Liza Koshy, an Indian-German American young woman with millions in followers who took a more comedic *youthful* approach to interviewing celebrities and designers on the carpet. Many were left asking "where is André?"