

Pricing Beauty

The Making of a Fashion Model

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Size Zero High-End Ethnic

PROTEST

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. Feminist activist Susie Orbach's brainchild for positive body image, any-body.org, 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, and 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 HAIRRED . . . *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, held at the New York Public Library, titled “Out of Fashion: The Absence of Color,” headed by industry leaders who were there to address their perceived decline of models of color on the catwalk.

Somewhere along the line, these critics claimed, fashion models went 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 considered offensive.¹ They are far too young and slender, wearing a size zero and having dangerously low body mass indexes (BMIs), a problem that stirred international attention after the anorexia-related deaths of two Latin American models over the course of two show seasons. 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.²

The call for diversity on the catwalk has not accomplished much. The same lineup of models from spring 2006 were again seen on the catwalks in spring 2007, despite a flood of media coverage of the debates, a ban in Madrid on models with excessively low BMIs, and the threat of monthly rallies to pressure the Council for Fashion Designers of America to acknowledge and fight racial discrimination. In its highly publicized July 2008 issue, *Vogue Italia* featured only black models throughout its pages in conspicuous reaction to the media criticism, but, on the whole, fashion magazines continue to underrepresent minorities. Critics point to the persistence of excessively thin and exclusively white models as evidence of sexist and racist production practices in fashion.³ As feminist and intersectionality theorists have long argued, gender and race are indeed powerful and connected social forces in cultural representation, shaping media as diverse as fashion ads to children's storybooks and political campaigns.⁴ While sociologists recognize the salience of gender and race in fashion, less understood are those processes of cultural production through which producers' ideas of gender and race interact and take shape in the finished product, the look. To this end, we should ask, how do race and gender inform cultural producers' hiring practices in the fashion modeling market?

So far I have used the art world approach to peel back layers of labor and conventions that constitute the look. Immediately behind the image are the models and their corporeal and emotional craft. Behind the model is the matchmaking booker, wheeling and dealing in bodily capital. Behind the booker, finally, is the client, that precarious tastemaker scrambling for authority to recognize the look. Behind them all are social structural patterns of inequality that constrain individual action. Cultural ideals of feminine and masculine difference along race and class lines limit the field of possibilities of the look.

This chapter traces the role of social structural forces in fashioning the look. I explain how producers in the modeling industry weigh their

decisions on two publicly polemical issues: slenderness and racial exclusion. When I interviewed industry insiders, I wanted to know how they talked about industry problems, what they saw as their own roles in creating those problems, and how they made potentially problematic decisions to hire—or overlook—certain models. What I found was a lot of empathy with any-body.org and Naomi Campbell, but also a lot of fear. As we saw in the last chapter, bookers and clients face intense uncertainty when selecting models. Under institutionalized constraints, producers rely on conventions, imitation, and stereotypes to guide their actions. Their everyday understandings of femininity, race, and class construct beauty ideals they think will resonate with imagined consumer audiences.

THE MEANINGS OF FASHION IMAGES

Models do much more than promote the sale of fashion. The model look promotes and disseminates ideas about how women and men *should* look. Models “do gender” professionally in ways that interlock with other social positions such as race, sexuality, and class,⁵ and there are endless critiques of fashion models and their gendered and racial meanings.

The Shrinking Model

As prescriptions for gender performance, fashion models represent what feminist scholarship has critiqued as oppressive beauty standards, the objectification and exploitation of women’s bodies for patriarchal and capitalist gain.⁶ In feminist theory, patriarchy and its capitalist mode of production thrive on the disparagement of the female body and the gap between promoted beauty ideals and reality. As Dorothy Smith has noted, the ideality of feminine beauty (and the gap between body reality and image) is inextricably part of the perpetual desire-producing machine of capitalism: “there is always work to be done.”⁷

But the real issue sounded in the media in the past three years has focused on the widening gap in high-end fashion—models are so incredibly thin, claim their critics, that we now have a catwalk aesthetic that is carnivalesque, even lethal. Research consistently suggests that the dominant ideal body for a woman has been slimming since the end of the 1950s, and evidenced among *Playboy* playmates, Miss America contestants, and fashion magazine advertisements.⁸ The National Organization for Women (NOW) 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 percent lower than that of the average woman, whereas twenty-five years ago, the differential was only 8 percent.⁹ Today, the average American fashion model is 5’11” tall and weighs 117 pounds, while the average American woman is 5’4” tall and weighs 163 pounds.¹⁰ Naomi Wolf’s feminist argument in her book *The Beauty Myth* is that the slimming of models goes hand in hand with women’s rising social status. As women gain political and social ground, beauty ideals are held to higher extremes of slenderness and perfection. Thus in Wolf’s reading, models are agents of backlash in a patriarchal political agenda.

Women’s bodies are not the only sites for commercial redefinitions; men, in recent decades, have joined women in the pursuit of more perfect bodies.¹¹ While the bulk of media attention highlights slim women in modeling, a few reports indicate a similar reduction in male models’ sizes, with similarly unforgiving silhouettes on the catwalk.¹² In the men’s editorial circuit, designer samples have shrunk from an Italian size 50 in the mid-1990s to the current size 46, roughly a size 38 in the United States. Editorial male models are expected to be within 145–160 pounds, with a minimum height of 6’. The average weight of an American man, meanwhile, rose from 166.3 pounds in 1960 to 191 pounds in 2002.¹³

The gap between the ideal and reality is a constant thorn in feminists’ side, a reminder that in a patriarchal order, the female body is perpetually lacking, and in a capitalist economy, all bodies are game for self-improvement. However, these kinds of feminist analyses sidestep fashion as a cultural production process and, in so doing, cannot tackle the real puzzle of size zero: Why are the models so slim when the vast majority of the people who buy the fashions are not? What kind of gaze imagines the body at size zero, and to what end?

Where Have All the Black Models Gone?

Bodies are racially coded, and the size zero look comes in one color: white. Based on a count of the 2007 Spring/Summer collections showcased on Style.com, 172 fashion houses displayed collections, yielding a total of 677 models.¹⁴ Of that 677, I counted 27 non-white models—those with dark skin ($n = 5$) or Asian features ($n = 12$). That’s less than 4 percent 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 with the most prestigious editorials,

runways, and campaigns. In November 2007, of the sixty featured models, there were two black models: Kinée (ranked no. 47) and Chanel Iman (no. 29); and two Asians: Du Juan (no. 40) and Hye (no. 16). Following the next Spring/Summer collections in 2008, the fashion press *Women's Wear Daily* took a similar count, finding that of 101 top shows and presentations posted on Style.com, 31 appeared to have no black models at all.¹⁵ Why are there so few models of color?

Ever since modeling work formalized into an occupation in the late 1920s, non-whites have worked at the margins of the industry. With the rise of purchasing power of the black middle class in the post-World War II period, African American models, called "black diamonds," appeared in "duplicate advertising"—ads first pitched to white audiences were copied featuring light-skinned black models to target the affluent minority consumer.¹⁶ Black models began appearing frequently in black publications such as *Ebony*, which was founded in 1945. Non-whites worked with separate agencies, such as Grace Del Marco Model Agency in New York, founded in 1946. In the 1960s, more non-white agencies cropped up, such as Black Beauties, which supplied its "black diamonds" to the African American market.¹⁷

Integration into mainstream fashion markets began in the 1960s, a time when black became both beautiful and good for business, and the prestigious Wilhelmina agency promoted black models to nonsegregated markets as a deliberate means to differentiate from its competitor, Ford Models. By the late 1960s, *Glamour*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Harper's Bazaar* had featured black cover models, and Beverly Johnson broke the last white barrier by shooting the cover for *American Vogue* in 1974. By 1969, Naomi Sims, considered the first black supermodel, appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine with the caption "Black Models Take Center Stage." The inside feature story began, "You see before you what may well be the most persuasive demonstration of successful black power ever assembled."¹⁸

Of course in 1969, as today, non-white models are still far from center, and modeling is far from a position of serious social power. Not only do non-white models find fewer employment opportunities in mainstream fashion markets, but darker-skinned women have been and continue to be posed and styled in exotic juxtapositions to the normative white body.¹⁹ As fashion theorist Rebecca Arnold has argued, the 1970s saw an uptick in the numbers of black and Asian models in high fashion, though these models were used primarily for photo shoots and

runways with "exotic" themes, chosen because they added an "extra frisson to the prevailing ideals of the time," ideals produced for whites, by whites.²⁰ Cultural theorists argue that representations of women cannot be understood without also studying race and class relations.²¹ From medical and scientific texts dissecting the anatomical "anomalies" of native women, to present-day hip-hop videos glorifying "the booty," an imperial gaze fixes on the non-white woman's body. The West's cultural fascination with non-Western women's bodies, such as the fame generated around Josephine Baker's rear end or the published autopsy of Sarah Bartmann, the "Hottentot Venus" of 1810, serves as a means of controlling the Other. Representations of men frequently ascribe notions of danger, sexual threat, and pathology to non-white masculinity, thereby perpetuating the dominance of white, straight, middle-class masculinity in the social hierarchy. Sexual stereotypes are instrumental in marking racial differences; they construct "pure white womanhood" as something to be protected, and they legitimate the subordination of minorities.²²

With this historical baggage, sexuality, gender, and race inequalities become mutually constitutive forces governing representations of women and men. In fashion, the model "look" is the embodied vision of imagined social differences. For intersectionality theorists, the look is a mirror for social inequalities, an expression of power. The look is a powerful symbolic representation of the intersections of gender, race, heterosexuality, and class; it is the embodied vision of our imagined social distinctions and fantasies.

Representation as Cultural Production

Representations do work. They arrange objects into sets of cultural meanings, they differentiate people into social categories, and they project scripts for personal behavior, morality, and desire.²³ 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. As in other art worlds, the accomplishment of fashion looks requires conventions, shared ways of doing things. Conventions are especially important, I argued in the last chapter, for cultural intermediaries to navigate uncertainty and ambiguity in the production process. Conventions 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 catalog look construct a set of legitimate selection criteria systematically different from those in the editorial market. How do these conventions perpetuate the skinny, racially exclusive look?

While models may represent entrenched systems of gender and racial inequality, models' bodies are themselves systematically screened for selection toward commercial and creative ends. The modeling market necessitates a mediation of social structural forces of gender and race through the organization and production processes of the market. Thus at issue is not the extent to which modeling serves gender and racial inequality but, rather, the question *how* do notions of gender and race inform the look? The fashion modeling industry is therefore a case to discover how social inequalities reproduce themselves in seemingly unlikely places, from the catalog house to the catwalk.

CLASSIFYING CLASS IN THE LOOK

The curious phenomenon of the white, size zero look does not pervade all segments of the fashion market. It is most likely to appear in editorial, not commercial, fashion. To get a handle on this type of editorial look, we must also examine its counterpart, the commercial look, and the systematic differences among conventional understandings of both editorial and commercial fashion production.

The "classic" and "soft" commercial look, as we've seen, accrues reliably high, steady earnings. When trying to describe the appeal and purpose of commercial models, producers in both the UK and United States made frequent references to sexual attractiveness, the "layperson," and "middle America" several times mentioning "my mom," "Kansas," and "Ohio" by way of illustration. Putting these word combinations together gives us a working definition of a commercial model: (1) someone considered sexually attractive by the layperson in Kansas; or (2) someone "your mom" in middle-America considers pretty. Or, as Isabel, a casting director in London, says, "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."

In contrast to the "boring" commercial look, the "edgy" editorial model is "unique." Some producers spoke of editorial looks and bodies with words like "sticks," "abnormal," and "freaks." Only a particular

type of audience will "get" the editorial type of model. In New York, Heather explained:

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. (Heather, New York booker)

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 other's cultural competences to appreciate coded avant-garde beauty. They are largely chosen to impress field insiders such as magazine editors, stylists, and industry buyers.

This is not to say that editorial fashion is indifferent to sales. Editorial fashion exists in the service of generating vast sums of profits, though by much different means than the commercial circuit. Whereas commercial models are hired to directly target and relate to consumers, editorial models are hired to communicate brand identities and to evoke ideas of luxury lifestyles. Only indirectly does this translate into profit through product licensing agreements and ready-to-wear sales further down the consumption line.

The editorial-commercial divide is therefore a proxy for how producers make sense of class distinctions among imagined consumers of looks. Editorial looks, as markers of elite taste, are more prestigious than commercial looks and their mass-market appeal. Visually we can picture fashion models as grouped along class hierarchies and their corresponding dress codes; there is the blue chip editorial in Prada and Gucci on one board and the commercial middle classes donned in Target knitwear on the other. The models in a Prada or a Target advertisement might have few concrete physical differences between them, but the labels featured in their respective advertisements do differ. In other words, the canon largely determines the content. *Vogue Italia* says "edgy," while Target is a dead ringer for "commercial."

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.

The split between editorial and commercial modeling and the relative devaluation of commercial modeling are both key to understanding how bookers and clients look for appropriate looks, because class is a defining feature of the organization of the field of fashion modeling. Having mapped out their respective class connotations, I now trace how producers in each circuit 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.

APPEALING TO EVERYBODY: THE COMMERCIAL LOOK

Consider first that which is “normal,” the commercial circuit. In contrast to the editorial look, the “pretty” commercial look is slightly older, slightly more racially diverse, and ever so slightly fuller in figure.

The Body Next Door

Commercial women and men at both Metro and Scene are likely to be larger than editorial models, if only by a few inches. Editorial women wear sizes 0–4 and range in age from thirteen to twenty-two, while “money girls” range from sizes 2–6 and work from age eighteen to well into their mid-thirties and beyond. A hip measurement of 36” would be unacceptable on the editorial boards, but it is common on the commercial boards. Editorial men tend to be as slim as a 28” waist and a 35” chest and between ages sixteen and twenty-five, whereas commercial men are “hunks in trunks” who work from age eighteen to age fifty and beyond.

Returning to our protesters at London Fashion Week, note that anybody.org called for more diversity *on the catwalk*, not in the *JCPenney* or *Marks & Spencer* catalog. London casting director Lesley Goring frankly told the *London Times* that full-figured models “wouldn’t sell collections at this level.”²⁴ But they do sell at the commercial level, the home of the “accessible” and “classic” girl-next-door look. 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, as a stylist explained:

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. (Clive, New York stylist)

Notice the racial coding of the “booty” but also the dismissal of the Old Navy models: they’re just *normal* and *ordinary* bodies, deliberately in step with the average shopper, as a casting director explains:

Well I think right now it’s kind of controversial because models of catalog need to be fuller because the average consumer, you know, I can talk for America, I can talk for Europe, the average consumer is fuller, you know what I mean? (Rayna, New York casting director)

Commercial producers value and search for the down-market “big booty” as they will any look they think will resonate with their target audience. Commercial bookers are likely to dismiss size zero models in favor of practical bodies for catalog 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!” (Francis, New York booker)

Commercial clients are directly accountable to their consumers’ desires. For instance, when Peter Simons, president of La Maison Simons department stores in Quebec, recently received over three hundred e-mails complaining about the extreme thinness of the models in its back-to-school clothing catalog, he immediately cancelled distribution of the catalog, removed the images from the store’s website, and issued an online apology.²⁵ By the end of the costly blunder, La Maison Simons pulled 450,000 catalogs, to the detriment of its back-to-school season sales but to its credit as a socially responsible (and responsive) retailer.

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 not compatible with commercial pragmatic undertakings, nor does it resonate to commercial producers’ interpretations of mainstream beauty and sex appeal.

Pursuit of Ethnic Diversity

Commercial producers are also more likely to embrace ethnic diversity among models than editorial producers in conscious efforts to reach target consumers. Commercial bookers talked of having to “balance” their board and meet quotas for blondes, Asians, or brunettes to satisfy their clients. If the commercial client uses, or passes on, minority models, then it is understood as a response to a calculated cost-benefit analysis of the market. For instance, a men’s booker at Metro makes sense of her commercial male models in terms of market research and target consumer tastes:

A lot of it has to do with—they test out different things. They know who will appeal to their buyers. Like when you put the same shirt on the blond-haired blue-eyed guy, black guy, and Asian guy, I guess they can tell which sells more. (Missy, New York men’s booker)

Similarly, one casting director explained why he pursues non-whites for some 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!” (David, New York 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.²⁶ Black women were well represented in the commercial world, appearing in the advertising pages of eight of the nine magazines. *Marriclaire*, for instance, showcased ten black models in advertising pages, selling nonfashion items, from deodorant to cosmetics. It featured just one black model in its editorial pages. This pattern emerged across the nine magazines, in which just two black models appeared in editorial spreads. 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 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. (Florence, London stylist)

This may strike some readers as counterintuitive, given the popular associations between artists and virtues of liberalism and cosmopolitanism, whereas the catalog shoppers of “middle America” are commonly accused of parochialism and intolerance.²⁷ Yet the catalog market is where fashion embraces ethnic representation. For instance, the casting director 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. (Kelly, New York casting director)

Here, diversity is strategically sought—not to be too obvious or too closely aligned with an affirmative action agenda but just enough to increase market share by representing the demographic base. JD, the male model from Manchester, UK, is of Middle Eastern descent. He explained his own commercial appeal:

On the advertising side of it, if any client’s actually trying to reach audiences, where they’re trying to sell stuff to people of a wider market, to get more brown people or Arabs or this or that buying their clothes, then they go for someone like me.

Commercial clients need minorities to “fill in pieces of the story,” explained Tomas:

Well it depends on the market, on the idea that they are selling. If the idea is they need a black guy to play this friendly character so people will think, “Oh my God that guy had the biggest smile! He’s so friendly,” whatever, he is really good for the demographic we are trying to reach. (Tomas, New York art director)

Commercial women are hired to embody a femininity that appeals to what producers *imagine* to be suburban, not-too-edgy, middle-class women and their imagined boyfriends. Similarly, commercial men embody heteronormative masculinity; they look like guys women will find attractive. This is not to say that catalog producers are the stewards of diversity and inclusion. Hardly, for though they cite “your mom” in the heartland as their target audience, whose mom, exactly, do they consider? Their imagined consumer upholds a restrictive and idealized vision of middle-class suburban attractiveness, but it is just that: an ideal with mass appeal, but nothing too surreal.

APPEALING TO OTHER PRODUCERS: THE EDITORIAL LOOK

If commercial producers are aiming to please, then editorial producers are looking to shock in a high-stakes game of distinction. In the last chapter we saw that clients working in the editorial circuit have more freedom to choose looks based on their personal taste, but greater freedom of course entails greater opportunities to make mistakes, with one's status in the field at stake. Given their limited possibilities for ascertaining sales 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 and whiter, and it has been steadily slimming since the 1980s.

The Hanger Body

“Too skinny?!” said the incredulous Nev, a magazine editor, when I asked her for her thoughts on the recent media scrutiny of models’ slim body sizes. “They’re models!” she exclaimed. Nev is a former booker who now manages a popular modeling industry magazine. She’s been around models’ bodies for the last fifteen years of her life. Like dozens of producers I interviewed, she doesn’t understand why slim models are a social issue. To Nev, as to many people in her industry, slender models are an obvious choice. They embody a naturalized vision of female beauty, one that all comes down to making clothes look good:

Well it's only just clothing. Designers want them to look a certain way. Like the clothes that hang, like a hanger, as they say. You know, originally models were just hangers. (Nev, *New York* magazine editor)

Nev’s idea that models are mere hangers for garments was a running theme among the bookers and clients I interviewed. Yet the idea does not speak to the original purpose of fashion models at all. The first models introduced a deliberate theatricality to fashion marketing, and they were a radical departure from previous displays on clothes hangers. Near the end of the nineteenth century, the English courtier Charles Frederic Worth was the first to show his designs on live “mannequins” in his Paris salon—an innovative way to show garments in action on live bodies rather than on dummies.²⁸ These young women were usually drawn from the workshop floor. They were not necessarily thin or

taut; of chief concern was that they had good manners. French courtier Paul Poiret wrote of a favorite model in 1913: “With round arms and rounded shoulders, she was plump and elegantly rolled as a cigarette.”²⁹ In the early 1920s, Cristobal Balenciaga showed his clothes on models with “short, stocky bodies,” closer to his own physique.

Several decades later, Fashion Week catwalks are now strutting an American size 00 and a UK size 2; that’s a waist measurement comparable to a typical seven-year-old girl’s.³⁰ Almost all bookers I talked to explained that models are skinnier now than they have ever witnessed during their careers. A New York showroom booker, Bre, entered the business out of college in 1996, when supermodels Cindy Crawford and Linda Evangelista were still shooting *Vogue* covers. She explained: “The thin thing now is beyond anything I have ever seen. This is the thinnest time in modeling that I have ever seen. It’s ridiculous!” 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 world.³¹

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, and 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. “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 our 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 size US 0–4, deferred to the clothes. Standardized clothing sizes entered the fashion industry with the rise of mass-produced ready-to-wear clothing post-World War II. With the end of made-to-measure clothes, it was increasingly important for models to conform to ready-made patterns, to which models’ bodies homogenized.³² Clothing catalog samples tend to come in sizes 4–6, but high-fashion designers cut samples based on standardized measurements of sizes 0–4. When they’re in a pinch days before showing a collection, alterations are the last thing they want to handle. Unlike the catalog studio, the catwalk does not lend itself to

instant Photoshop or safety-pinning imperfections. A problematic fit cannot be sent down the catwalk; small clothes therefore necessitate small models:

I don't want someone that looks emaciated or like they're actually about to die—there's nothing pleasant about that. But in general models have to be very, very skinny because the clothes hang better on skinny, tall people. You know an Alaïa dress is never gonna look as good on someone who's a size 12 as it is on [a] size 8. I have to deal with that every morning, you know, so you just have to be realistic about it. (Isabel, London casting director)

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

Because the shapes. Clothes hang off, they fall, they look better on a thinner model. (Xavier, London stylist)

Producers talked about slenderness as an aesthetic law for women and, to a lesser extent, for men as well. Considering the slim size 38 suit and “pencil-neck” bodies appearing on men's Fashion Week catwalks in Europe, one male model told reporters, “Designers like the skinny guy... It looks good in clothes, and that's the main thing.”³³

Of course societal norms underlie aesthetic ones, and very few codes of physical attraction are timeless or universal. 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 designers 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 eating disorders, 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.³⁴ 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.” Like any convention, sample sizes exert inertia. Once in place, conventions constrain the potentially limitless field of possible alternate ways of organizing an art world.³⁵

Consider shoe size. A female model with size 11 feet poses an instant problem for any client. When Kelly, the bookings editor at a teen fashion magazine in New York, meets such a model, she makes a tough decision: A size 11 foot will not fit into the typical size 9 sample shoes that showrooms provide her for fashion shoots. To make the shoot happen, Kelly's company will have to buy the larger shoes, and they will probably end up in storage in the huge office closet (where the shoes will linger, along with racks of handbags and clothes, until they are used again or most likely distributed as office freebies). This means that Kelly has a bigger investment riding on the model with a size 11 foot than one with a size 9 foot.

Models who can't fit into sample clothing pose similar difficulties for those who hire them. Smaller models are not very problematic, as it is easier to pin baggy clothes in photo shoots than to add extra fabric to a tight fit. Clients foresee these problems all the time, even in their casual conversations. For example, at one photo shoot, I watched as two stylists flipped through a new edition of *Vogue*, pausing to praise and critique various images in typically flamboyant fashion terms:

S1: These hair ads are disgusting!

S2: It's very LA. [turns a page]

S1: Oh, I love this, everything, the light, the propping, it's amazing!

S2: I ripped that out and hung it up on my wall for inspiration. I love it too!

S1: It's sick, sick, sickness!

The conversation took a serious turn when the two stylists turned the page to find a plus-size model posing in a D&G fragrance ad shot by Steven Meisel. They admired the image and were enticed by the possibility of doing their own shoots with the full-figured model. But, they admitted, they were unlikely to ever choose her for a shoot:

S1: Good for her! I love that. She looks really good.

S2: I think so too.

S1: My friend [a photographer] likes it too and wants to shoot a plus-size model for an editorial story. But I can't do it. I can't get the clothes, not for high fashion, which is what I specialize in. I don't know where, do you know?

S2: No, I don't know.

S1: I don't know.

Without conventions like standardized sizes, art worlds like fashion would not happen. Finding the right look for an editorial job is a

daunting task. Bookers estimated that anywhere between 3,000 and 5,000 models flock to New York during a show season, and over the course of about one week, runways with approximately twenty-five 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 sociologist Harrison White, but even more apparent in a cultural production market like fashion, where uncertainty is the norm. Amid all the uncertainty, producers rely on imitation, especially in the high-risk editorial market, where fleeting aesthetic preferences can quickly snowball to make—or break—a model's career. The ironic result is an isomorphism of the look, frequently bemoaned in popular presses as the homogenization of beauty.³⁶

Editorial producers are entangled in an institutionalized production system, where the goods produced—the models—are embedded in a historically shaped and commerce-driven network of agents, designers, and editors. Each actor in the system is trying to match as best she can what she thinks will complement the demands of cooperating actors and she must make these rapid decisions based on past records and experiences. 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; and editors praise the kinds of looks they think their advertisers will appreciate. Bookers and clients alike are uncomfortably close to uncertainty. 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 Kare Moss." With everyone on the lookout for the next celebrated "wait" size zero may not be the intended outcome of any particular producer, but, under institutional constraints, it is locked in as a survival strategy. Magazine editors and stylists alike, those who seemed to have considerable power as influential tastemakers, appeared helpless against sample-size conventions:

It depends on the stylist too and like what the story is. It's like if the clothes are tiny and you know, it's driven by samples, it's driven by the designers. It's not the magazine saying "we want skinny girls." That's what the designers are doing in the samples, and that's why we have to have these girls. (Moss, New York magazine casting)

Photographers similarly deferred to a higher authority; after all, they explained, they must produce appealing pictures for their advertisers and editors, and ultimately, designers determine the look.³⁷

To the critics I say go out there and look at all the clothes that are made for people in fashion! It doesn't look flattering, like you're gonna put a bigger girl in Miss Sixty jeans? No, it doesn't work. And I think fashion houses direct the look of what kind of people they want to see wear their clothes. It's the result of them. (Billy, New York photographer)

Designers, for their part, appeared equally as helpless when faced with predicting an agency's supply of models. They expect models who audition for their castings to be the conventional sizes 0-4, and to prepare their sample sizes accordingly. They also anticipate that a well-received show will be one that meets an editorial audience's expectations for models.

For instance, London design duo Tim and Mike of the label *B-rude* were happy to have friends and nightclub regulars walk in their London Fashion Week show, including one woman in her sixties. "You know," said Mike, "we aren't just constantly worried about youth or anything. I'd like to show people that, people in their sixties and stuff. I mean she's a very elegant lady."

"Yeah, I mean we really want other people, we really want diversity in the show, you know, there's no fascism in our show!" Tim added.

However, both conceded that professional models are better at conveying their brand image, as models can walk with greater confidence and attract more favorable press coverage. Tim and Mike thus see themselves as rather limited by modeling agencies in their pursuit of body diversity:

Basically we take who the agencies give us—again, it's down to the agencies isn't it, and who they have on their books. You know, if they only choose that kind of waif, tall figure then that's what we've got to choose from.

Bookers, who control the supply of models and would therefore seem to direct the supply's shape and size, 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 bear 'em, join 'em, honey! That's the way it is. We're not gonna change the majority here—then we'll all be outta the job! (Kath, New York booker)

Likewise, commenting on the increase in using more slender male models, a men's booker told reporters in New York, "It's client driven. That's just the size that blue-chip designers and high-end editorials want."³⁸

Ask designers why they book skinny models and they'll reply that that's what the agents are providing. Ask agents why they promote skinny models and they'll reply that that's what the designers want. And around we go. 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 individually entangled actions.

Sex and the Unattainable Body

One 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. (Hall, New York photographer)

It's not that producers *don't* want the body; they want a particular type of body for the carwalk, one that fits with the editorial convention 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 imagined boyfriend. Sex doesn't do the selling in the editorial world. Instead there is a construction of unattainable fantasy femininities and masculinities, envisioned by multiple gazes—gay, straight, male, and female—with a self-preferential audience of fellow elite producers in mind.

The gay gaze doesn't do all the work of fashioning the look. One booker boldly claimed that the size zero look is a result of the predominance of gay men in fashion:

As the business has changed, more gay men have come into positions of power in the business, as casting directors, art directors, creative directors. Therefore, their ideal of beauty is a young guy, let's say a 15-year-old guy. So what comes closest to looking like that is a young girl who is almost prepubescent. She is really thin, has no breasts, no hips, no butt. . . . It has evolved into this young, thin, no-feminine aspect part of the body. It's because of gay men in the business, I know it! (Bre, New York booker)

Gay men indeed have an increased presence in the industry over the last decades, especially as fashion design has shifted from a formerly

devalued and feminized trade occupation associated with manufacture and sewing toward a celebrated cultural occupation.³⁹ Since the 1980s, gay stylists, art directors, and designers have been at the forefront of changing fashion's body aesthetic, particularly concerning new representations of masculinity.⁴⁰ But this is too easy an explanation behind women's boyish fashion figures. First, masculine ideals vary widely within any community; from bears and bikers to metrosexuals, there is no single gay taste in physical appearance. Second, correlation does not imply causality, and a causal link between the presence of gay men and the slim look of women models would be impossible to prove when we analyze fashion as an art world. Through the art world perspective, it becomes clear that individual personal preferences alone—whether those of gay men or straight women—do not determine the look. Rather, the look results from a coordinated, collective process, constrained as much by convention and dominant cultural ideas as by personal taste and desire. At most, the presence of gay men in the industry indirectly influences the direction of the look, in tandem with producers' perceptions of consumer tastes.

These tastes circulate and transform within the circuit, sometimes getting picked up as the next hot look and other times being ignored altogether. The mediation of tastes and desire does not work in any linear or straightforward way. This became clear to me as I spoke with Victor, a gay American fashion designer based in London. Together with his design partner, also a gay man, Victor wanted to cast all voluptuous models for his Fashion Week show; as he put it, he had in mind a "hot tits-and-ass casting." But casting for a show, he explained, involves more than just his own taste:

A great rack is great, you know what I mean? It's super hot, but it's like, not necessarily what you want to put in your clothes, you know. . . . When I'm sending clothes down the runway and you're trying to make everybody look different, but the same, and you're trying to present a really strong focused package, you know, you're just kind of, you're appealing to yourself but you're also appealing to the audience, you know, and what's popular (Victor, London designer)

Also eager to distance themselves from ordinary visions of middle-class femininity, editorial clients actively look for the extraordinary body, one that so radically stretches mainstream slenderness that it borders on what they imagine "your mom" might register as the uncanny or the ugly. 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, there's something kind of average, a little too attainable, and too cheap about curves. 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 carwalk, isn't it? It's just like everything wobbles. It doesn't look so good. (Leah, 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 in producing high-end looks. It is a key marker for fashionable elite sensibility. As Victor, the fashion designer, put it, "You're displaying your clothes on this ageless unattainable beauty, really."

Laisser-Faire Racism

"In all of the high fashion that we are talking about, it is really super white," explained Clive, a New York stylist. By that he means that the high-end edgy look, with its youthful, skinny packaging, tends to come in pale shades of white. The white bias is evident on the boards of both agencies. At Metro, approximately 20 out of 200 women of color were on the books and 10 out of 125 men of color. At Scene, 8 out of 150 women were non-white⁴¹—proportions for which agents readily apologized, bemoaning the difficulties they faced 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. (Erica, London booker)

It's not the case that women of color "opt out" of editorial 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 directly seeking out models to fill specific niches, for instance, Elite Model Management's notorious search for a dark-skinned model in remote villages of sub-Saharan Africa.⁴² 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 from supplying minorities. In an age of global scouting, non-white candidates are not difficult to find.

The shortage of models of color cannot be explained by prejudice alone. Bookers and clients, as I showed in the last chapter, come from a variety of social and class backgrounds. They are not a particularly bigoted bunch. On the contrary, they take great pains to distance themselves from traditional forms of racist rhetoric. Most producers I interviewed were frustrated by the absence of minorities in fashion—if it were it up to them, they hinted, ethnic diversity would always be "in." They laid blame in all directions: bookers blamed clients, clients blamed bookers, and bookers even blamed *other* bookers, as Rio, himself of Southeast Asian descent, did several times throughout our talk:

People right away think that if you're ethnic then you're "urban." You're street style. You're ghetto. You're not higher class. Because you're white, you're more expensive, and because you're not white, your day rate is lower. I'm a person for color, and I feel that among agents I'm alone, totally. (Rio, New York booker)

Bookers said they could and would take on more models of color, and though they claimed to "love flavor" and diversity, they admitted that they have "bent" under the constraints to meet clients' demands. They shared a common understanding, that ethnic models have fewer job opportunities than their white counterparts, and said that clients and "the market" were largely to blame for any racial imbalance. As Rachel, a 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 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. (Lawrence, New York stylist)

But what is "the market," and how much of it is determined by economic forces? White consumers do in fact spend more total dollars on fashion and apparel. Black households spent \$2.2 billion on clothing in 2005, when total US apparel sales reached \$181 billion.⁴³ That's a black market share of 13 percent. Conventional wisdom and some marketing research suggest that consumers of fashion identify more with models of their own race, although other psychological studies have questioned

the salience of race as a cue for social identification.⁴⁴ Therefore, advertisers may think they stand to gain more by using white models to appeal to majority white audiences.⁴⁵ This economic logic is certainly relevant at the commercial level of fashion, where in fact producers consider consumer demographics and choose representative models accordingly.

But in the editorial circuit, the relationship between models and units sold becomes blurred. It's not clear what a model on the Prada runway is selling, or to whom. We've already seen in the last chapter that editorial clients are not beholden to the mass buying public; they do not pay attention to things such as buyer demographics, focus groups, or market research. Rather, personal reactions to "edgy" and the buzz pulsing through the circuit are what drive them. Thus their economic decisions are fundamentally cultural considerations. When producers explain their actions using the logic of "the market," they are strategically pulling from neoclassical economic discourse to rationalize their choices. As an idea, the market does considerable discursive work: it naturalizes market outcomes, in effect reducing cultural products into some formulaic inevitability. It rationalizes the work of tastemaking into a set of neutral outcomes when supply meets demand. In so doing, it obscures cultural values and renders invisible sexism and racism.

At a time when most Americans are uncomfortable with racist arguments predicated on innate inferiority, a "kinder, gentler" anti-black racial ideology has emerged to perpetuate negative racial stereotypes while blaming non-whites for their own problems. Lawrence Bobo has called this "laissez-faire racism" because of the tendency to blame blacks themselves for black-white inequality.⁴⁶ Like "the marker" discourse, laissez-faire racism naturalizes social processes so that they seem natural and unproblematic. This belief in the market's rationality permeates producers' aesthetic choices, making the racial inequalities of beauty seem normal, natural, and inevitable.

The orthodox economic concept of markets as neutral sites where supply meets demand does little to explain the racial imbalance in editorial fashion. Luckily this is a view of markets that most sociologists reject. We tend to see markets as economic, cultural, and structural formations. My aim isn't to reject market-based explanations but to respectify the analysis to ask what, really, is a market? And with regard to the race gap, what normative understandings of race do producers employ, and how do these shape their decisions?

Central to any cultural intermediaries' engagement with the fashion market are their conceptions of fashion consumers, particularly the dif-

ferences they imagine between white and non-white shoppers. Drawing on entrenched stereotypes of Latinos, African Americans, and Asians, bookers and clients suggested that non-whites are unlikely ideal customers of luxury labels. A booker who runs the men's division at an agency in New York explained why his board of one hundred and forty male models includes just ten non-white men:

Blacks and Latinos don't make a lot of money. What I'm in is marketing. I'm trying to sell products. I'm selling bodies that are going to be hired by the designers. People that are buying Calvin Klein, or RL, Gucci, Prada—they aren't black or Latino. Asian is kind of a grey area, because they're not entirely minority, nor are they entirely majority. Asians are kind of seen in the middle of being black and white. And they're extremely intelligent, talented, and they tend to be very successful in everything they do, but they're not Caucasian. They tend to, in a marketing sense—people assume they have money. Whereas blacks and Latinos are seen to have the money but aren't going to buy the brands. (Ivan, New York men's booker)

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

Me personally, in my opinion, there really is no good, good, black girl around. The really good, good black girl around [is] still the same, and [is] still the one that everybody wants. . . . It's very difficult to find one. The agency [doesn't] deliver enough choice to make happy the client. (Oden, New York casting director)

And around we go, yet again: bookers claim to be limited by consumer and client demand, and clients claim to be limited by bookers' supply.

What Makes a Really Good Ethnic Model?

Both the booker and the client can agree that it's very hard to find good ethnic models, 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 are not enough good ones. (Leah, 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 its 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 petite. 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. (Ann, New York magazine editor)

Many bookers and clients responded to the question of ethnic models by predominantly discussing their woes in booking black women, although the problem of diversity is chiefly with blackness over other ethnicities. This makes sense, given the historical operation of racial categories, in particular 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 back door is open through which non-blacks can "pass," if not as white then as nonproblematic categories.⁴⁷ While fashion producers on the whole were seemingly 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, for instance, a booker in London said:

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.

Likewise, an agent in New York said:

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.

Several other bookers saw the backside as particularly problematic when booking black models. The black backside has recently received plenty of attention in the press concerning First Lady Michelle Obama, whose entire body has been dismembered into arms, legs, butt, and hair, each part becoming a portal to read conflict, disorder, guile, and class.⁴⁸

A black family in the White House has not eradicated bodily racial stereotypes but allowed for closer public inspection of them.

What matters is not the truth or falsehood of physical differences between white and non-white women but, rather, bookers' *presumption* that such differences are unattractive and problematic. The implicit frame of beauty is so firmly rooted in whiteness that any deviation from a white, bourgeois body is viewed with disdain:

I think they have different body forms, so certain clothes don't fit that body type, and if they don't fit the body type, then they're not going to be able to sell the clothes. . . . Well, think about for a jeans ad—if you've got a black or Latina, are they gonna be able to fit the jeans, or are they gonna be able to wear that type? It's just, you know, specific clothes are made for specific people, and for high fashion usually you're trying to tell the story to a target audience. (Billy, New York photographer)

The fashion story, Billy implied, should resonate with a white elite audience, which is presumed to want an idealized svelte and asexual heroine. Such a story is incompatible with non-white women in the eyes of clients, who tended to equate black models with sexual availability. A 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. (Bruno, London stylist)

Producers made associations between black looks and tawdriness, two corrupting elements they seek to avoid in editorial fashion. I spoke with one young New York designer in her downtown studio moments after she held her Fashion Week show casting. Out of sixty candidates, she decided on five models, and 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 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" [gestured to the pictures of models: all pale, blonde, young, and thin]. "I mean this girl has a really pretty face." She picked up a card from the stack of rejects, a head shot of a young African girl 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. (Donna, New York designer)

Beauty is desired because it is idealized and unattainable, two criteria that are fundamentally incompatible with historical representations of non-white women.

High-End Ethnic Looks

A really good ethnic model, then, is one who embodies an attempt to reconcile contradictory social categories. One stylist calls the embodiment of this cultural contradiction the *high-end ethnic* look, which is a look of ethnic difference specific to the editorial fashion circuit:

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. (Clive, New York 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 embodies an air of upper-class exclusivity and 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, either with minimal or extreme markers of racial difference, which I call *ethnicity lite* and *exotic ethnicity* looks.

In the first instance, fashion producers create a look of *ethnicity lite*, an implicitly white look with a touch of otherness, what bell hooks has called a "sanitized ethnic image" and a variant of the "tragic mulatto" woman in nineteenth-century American literature and film.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

Mixed-race models are the pinnacle of this type of look, and bookers and clients value their "crossover" appeal to wide consumer audiences. *Ethnicity lite* blends mainstream white beauty ideals with just a touch of otherness. For example, a booker, speaking about an Asian model, said:

So, I mean we have a very successful Asian girl, but—do you know what—she has got a very approachable look. The structure of her face is not—her eyes aren't too wide set, she's got a very American version of the look, if you

see what I mean. She is very smiley, she's got such an American personality. (Paul, New York booker)

A few clients criticized this look as intentionally whitewashing ethnicity, though they scout for models who embody it all the same:

"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. (Frank, New York casting director)

Ethnicity lite combines high-class refinement with ethnic diversity. For instance, in a 2007 news article, one casting director made a racial and class-coded assessment of the success of a light-skinned black male model named T. J., who was one of three black men sought after by high-end designers such as Michael Kors: "For a young person, T. J. is a fine, elegant man. Michael Kors isn't cheap clothing, it's refined and elegant in a less urban way."⁵¹

In addition to upper-class suitability, producers see mixed looks as "interesting," a special and safe type of beauty they expect from mixing racial backgrounds, as one London casting director put it:

To be honest with you, the most kind of unusual, the most kind of interesting girls on the planet are the girls that have got some kind of unusual mix. You know, they've got like parents that are from different kinds of backgrounds.

In these kinds of assessments of multiracial looks, producers invoke scientific racial discourses that presuppose essential, discrete racial lines. Whereas nineteenth- and twentieth-century science warned of the moral and natural hazards of miscegenation, present-day genetic science celebrates crossing racial boundaries. Some genetic scientists now say that "people with mixed-race faces appear healthier and more appealing" than people of just one race. The beauty bonus that mixed-race people supposedly enjoy signals their superior fitness to reproduce, according to some evolutionary psychologists who study attractiveness.⁵²

Celebratory discourses of racial intermixing—and the triumph of cultural assimilation that they imply—have been cropping up in the last decade in media accounts of changing national demographics.⁵³ Yet praising the beauty of mixed-race people is fraught with essentialist tensions, even as journalists and scientists would seek to overcome them. As critics note, the glorified beauty of mixed-race women reifies the

idea of biological “pure” and distinct racial categories as well as a belief in their distinct physical markers.

The heightened visibility of mixed-race bodies does not necessarily equate to social progress. Media tend to treat mixed-race people favorably as symbols of racial harmony, thereby obscuring social problems such as their systemic exclusion. Furthermore, cultural critics contend that the miscegenation taboo lurks in the background of what are oftentimes highly sexualized images of mixed-race women.⁵⁴ *Ethnicity lite* looks are loaded with cultural meanings: corruption, celebration, miscegenation, and evolutionary supremacy.

“What’s your mix?” was a frequent question I heard at castings. When put to me time and again, I responded, “White and a quarter-Korean,” as though my blood and identity could be parsed into quartiles of ethnic varieties. Sometimes I could tell clients wanted to hear more, so I’d tell them my story, part of Mears family folklore: a Korean grandmother born to a mail-order bride and a sugar plantation hand in Hawaii, a half-Korean father, and a third-generation Polish and Czech mother. I grew up white in the South and never thought much about my Korean ancestry until I learned it was a sellable part of my look.

Mixed racial identity, like any racial category, is fluid and context specific. Like everything else in modeling—age, size, and personality—ethnicity is a matter of passing, which I understood in the early days of fieldwork after this exchange at the agency:

“Oh, one more thing,” my booker stopped me on my way out the door to a day of castings. “You mentioned that you have a little Asian in you?”

“Yeah, quarter-Korean,” I replied.

“Okay,” she said. “When you go to see M. for his casting, don’t mention that. Because he likes the all-American kind of girl, like not too much ethnicity. Not that there’s anything wrong with it at all, but it’s just what he likes. And you said you also have what, like some Eastern European, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, deflated. “Pole and Czech.”

“Okay, that’s what we said you were, like Czech and Polish descent.”

I was instructed, in other words, to pass, to feign membership across a different racial category. Passing as a different racial category has a long history in the United States, where the one-drop rule fixed into law otherwise fictitious race categories, prompting great numbers of mixed-race people to hide their black ancestry in order to access full American citizenship.⁵⁵ Passing in fashion is a modern inverse of this history, in which models tell seemingly inconsequential “white lies” to strategi-

cally blend in or stand out from the pack. Such is the story of JD, the London male model from Manchester we met in Chapter 2, who is now twenty-two years. Only “JD” is not his real name.

Jamal Daher is of mixed-ethnic heritage, from the Middle East and South America. After participating in a modeling contest—he claims to have entered on a fluke with friends while visiting London—Jamal came in second place. Scouts at the contest, ironically titled “Face of the Future,” gave him a contract and a new name, JD.

“I’m like, fuck off, my name’s not JD! It’s Jamal Daher. They’re like, ‘What’s your name?’”

Jamal Daher

“Uhhh, okay, JD, anyway?”

JD thought he was the only Middle Eastern fashion model, until he went to Paris and met Nasser, Asad, Nabil, and Samir, all cleverly nicknamed Nate, Alex, Billy, and Sam. He quickly learned that ethnicity is a fashion accessory he could use to dress up his look. His new friends taught him how to pass between castings. He recalled:

They were like, “Okay when you go to see this client, when they ask you where you originate from, make sure you say Arabic, North African, because he loves North Africans, don’t try to hide you’re an Arab. But when you go to see this woman, she’s actually very racist, so make sure you’re Spanish or Brazilian.”

Brazilian, Moroccan, Italian—JD has worn all these labels. Conforming to the *ethnicity lite* look, JD might temper his ethnic identity to pass as *normal* and white, or *special* and ethnic. Bookers and clients generally praise the *ethnicity lite* look as a positive step toward racial inclusion, though it entails a rather limited definition of diversity:

I will say that [a designer] 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. (Bre, New York booker)

Ethnicity lite is one construction of the high-end ethnic look. In the second construction, producers can embrace racial markers to create striking exoticism. These *exotic ethnic* looks present a radical departure from the white frame and are best represented by Alec Wek, a famous once-bald Sudanese model with very dark skin. This is the sort of “funky” model that bookers and clients claim to really enjoy pushing, but they always acknowledge the difficulties in doing so:



FIGURE 5.1. A dark-skinned model, one construction of the high-end ethnic look, backstage during Fashion Week

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 Kaberry type of girl, you know a gorgeous girl, but a little bit lighter, or I would say, *whiter*. People want a white black girl. (Christoph, New York booker)

Exoticism too has a long history rooted in imperialism. Unlike racism, the fear and hate of otherness, exoticism views other cultures as “a series of beautiful fantasies to tease and enjoy.”⁵⁶

The Color-blind Grammar of Aesthetics

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. “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 (politically correct) trend noted by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003). Sociologists have argued that since

the achievement of formal legal equality in the 1960s, racism has taken the form of “color blindness.”

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.⁵⁷ Throughout my interviews, race was the one question most likely to make people feel awkward and to stumble in their speech. In response to the question “Why do you think you tend to use few minorities?,” clients frequently veered into long tangential stories before addressing the uncomfortable issue:

Oh [sigh] that’s a good question. We’re always trying to get more ethnicity in the magazine. You know you have to work with what’s available, you know, and for us we need the girls to be young, which often means that they can’t be in school or they have to be able to miss school because we do advocate them being in school. School’s a priority. They can always model on the weekend, they can model on vacation, they can miss a few days of school, but—they should be in school. But yeah, I just, I forget, why do I go off on tangents? (Joss, New York magazine editor)

Clients also tried to discuss their casting decisions entirely in terms of aesthetics and appearances, but rarely did their preferences for white models have anything to do with their own personal racial beliefs—witness “color-blind racism” to the extreme:

I’m not into putting people in [my show] because they’re this or they’re that [race]. I’m into putting people in if they’re cool looking. It’s a feeling. (Jay, New York designer)

Another casting director in London had trouble trying to explain why the shows he casts have a reputation for being all white:

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.

Color-blind racism takes on an ironic meaning in the fashion industry, because it is here that color cannot *not* be noticed. The flip side of color-blind racism is deliberate racial awareness, which one client (out of forty clients) was eager to discuss. Tim and Mike, the design team behind a nightclub-inspired sportswear line in London, sent seven out of thirty-six men and women of color down their Fashion Week catwalk. They cast models with a deliberate eye for skin color:

Our clothes really suit black people, you know. Some of the guy's stuff, you know, we had this one, for example, where at the fitting we had this little baby-pink sort of tracksuit. We tried it on all the white boys and it just looked terrible, and we put it on [a black model] and it was like, straightaway, like *wow*, it was great. He could really wear it. (Tim and Mike, London designers)

Tim and Mike were the exception among clients who generally talked about non-whites as aesthetic disruptions. Non-white models are rarely 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 New York City 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 that would be disturbed by the introduction of a black pair of legs in the line.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ Of course at issue was not really 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 by speaking with a racial grammar of aesthetics.

Today producers frequently evoke this "aesthetic of uniformity" to account for white catwalks. The models are uniformly white, so producers claim, in an effort to highlight the clothes rather than the models:

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. (Gretchen, New York magazine editor)

Color blindness reaches so far into the heart of the artist-type 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 a New York Public Library (NYPL) event, "personality" was the word of choice for those reluctant to talk about race or racism. Echoing the editor's explanation earlier, the NYPL panel repeatedly decreed a change in the industry, from girls with "character" in the 1970s to today's hoards of nameless, faceless "blank slates"—the code word for white models—who can presumably show clothes with-

out distracting from them (as though alarmingly emaciated bodies don't draw the viewer's attention).

Editorial modeling is not only about showing clothes; it is about projecting an ideal brand world, one in which women of color and women of corpulence do not fit.

Tokenism

If this is the case, then 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. (David, New York casting director)

Producers hire tokens, non-white exceptions to their otherwise white lineups, as a way to signal their inclusiveness and to publicly embrace diversity.

Tokens, like any representations, do work in the field. They do the work of legitimizing exclusion. The token minority offers the false resolution of racial tension. If and when the token ethnic model hits the jackpot, her presence becomes a miracle on two counts: first to have triumphed in a seemingly magical contest, and second to have won as a racial minority. This sweet victory obscures bitter struggles, not just the field-specific fight for symbolic capital but also struggles over representation in the social world. The editorial wondergirl, the unconventional superstar who succeeds beyond all expectations, inadvertently naturalizes the slim chances for everyone else.

Tokenism may well now be incorporated as part of a set of aesthetic expectations, a sole outlier of difference that contributes to the appropriateness of the catwalk ensemble. The token minority gives sense to the whole visual apparatus; her singular presence is expected. Without her, fashionistas may notice something is missing, as one *New York Times* critic remarked of Calvin Klein's 2007 lineup of all-white models: "It seems out of touch."⁶⁰ In much the same way, an entire lineup of black models would also seem out of the ordinary, as was the July 2008 issue of *Vogue Italia* in its exclusive use of black models.

Tokenism is so entrenched in editorial production that several bookers admitted it guided their scouting decisions:

But with black girls, it always seems, as bad as it sounds but it's true and everybody sees it, there's like the token black girl. We're living in 2006 and there's one or two black girls in a show, in every show, and every magazine... I don't know if it's so much a challenge as just luck in terms of the black girls. You wanna get that one black girl that all the designers will use in one season. (Paul, New York booker)

In a market that prizes token difference, one person becomes the symbolic stand-in for diversity, thereby limiting every other minority's chances. Rallying around the token means it's all or nothing for ethnic models, and hence for bookers it is a riskier endeavor than booking whites. Paul continued: "We have a black girl that's from Sudan that I really believe in. Very strong, very unusual looking. She's under that umbrella of interesting, but still you can tell she's a model and classic at the same time." He paused and said: "But with a black girl, it's such a hard risk, I have to say, what's her direction and what's her longevity?"

Two Tokens

The black models I interviewed, though few in number, spoke at length on this issue. Alia was twenty-two years old when I first met her, at which point she was consistently booking big commercial jobs in New York after a rocky two years spent hustling in restaurants and looking for a break. When she arrived in the city from Chicago, she visited agency after agency in search of representation, toting her portfolio full of Midwestern catalog pictures, hearing time and time again the same line of rejection:

"Oh, you are absolutely stunning, but we already have four black girls, we can't take on another one." Or, "Oh, you're beautiful, but we have this girl and you two look too much alike." And then they'll show me a girl that looks like Mariah Carey. And I'm like, in what way do we look alike, aside from the fact that I'm black and she's half black?

After months of following up with agents who had shown her the door, she finally landed a contract with a prestigious high-fashion agency, but on the commercial board. She was making almost \$400,000 a year doing catalogs, shampoo commercials, and even parts modeling, for example, nail polish advertisements. Alia has dark skin and naturally curly long hair. She carries herself with poise and constantly flashes a brilliant smile, revealing a small gap between her two front teeth. It's

easy to see why commercial clients like her, but as we spoke, it was clear that she was desperate to crack into the editorial circuit. To Alia, skin color is and always has been a salient factor constraining her opportunities. Race, she says, explains why her bookers do not push her as hard as white models for editorial campaigns:

I don't think it's deliberate... It's just how they don't see you. It's like they don't even think of me that way, and that's what's so sad.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Sofia, a twenty-one-year-old Jamaican model, feels marginalized by both her race and her body. When I met her in London, she was struggling to lose an inch from her 36" hips, after being told by her agents that she had a "fat bum." Sofia has dark skin and short natural hair cropped into a flattop; at 5'10" it's hard to see any "fat" on her long and lean frame. She hopes to return to New York next season for the Fashion Week castings to try again to break in as the next star in the editorial circuit. Sofia is in the opposite position of Alia—she has some prestige without the paycheck. "I do editorials, catwalks," she explains. "So I'm like a *fashion* model girl," she explains. As for catalog, "I wish," she says. "They say that pays a lot. I've never—I guess they don't see me as that." As a black contender in the editorial circuit, success seems a slim chance, especially when Sofia imagines her chances compared to her white peers:

It's never going to be the same. It's a thing in our culture that we always think black people have to try twice as hard as a white person. Twice as hard... Yeah, if you look like at a show, there's like hardly any black girls. Or maybe there's this one black girl. So your chances are like, yeah.

As the marked category against the unmarked white hegemony, non-whiteness calls attention to itself. For the majority of white high-end cultural producers, it goes without saying that they want a *specific* type of non-white model that will fit an entrenched and subconscious valorization of whiteness. The presence of non-whites may alleviate liberal guilt, or 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.

THE INVISIBLE HAND

Fashion is an easy target of cultural criticism. The parade of size zero white girls down the catwalk affords fresh fodder for critiquing every

six months, but charges of racism and sexism on the catwalk miss the larger sociological point. Fashion producers do not select models according to sexist or racist agendas; rather, looks materialize out of institutional arrangements and conventions that vary systematically across fashion's two spheres of production, the editorial and the commercial. Within these two spheres, models are chosen to embody market-specific visions of femininity and masculinity that relate to the class positioning of an imagined audience. The look thus articulates ideas of gender, sexuality, and race that are mediated by class.

The size zero high-end ethnic look exists primarily in the editorial fashion market, but it cannot be understood without also understanding that realm of fashion in which it is absent, the commercial. In the commercial market, a fuller-figured, 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 and create a risk-free look that will be successful, defined as units sold.

To return to the NYPL event in New York, "The Absence of Color," panel moderator and former model Bethann Hardison praised advertisers for representing non-whites: "They know who they're talking to, they're talking to their consumers, and that's why commercial advertising is really on point."

To whom, then, are the editorial producers talking? Producers in the field of high-end fashion are attempting to awe and inspire each other. They choose models principally because they *do not* have anything in common with the average shopper. When it comes to the female body in modern Western thought, there has always been a premium on containment and control, and even more so in bourgeois society.⁶¹ This aesthetic is visible in commercial work and advertising, where bodies are far from flabby or otherwise undisciplined. But in editorial work, producers push past Western norms of beauty in pursuit of edginess, rejecting sex appeal and mainstream heteronormative femininity. Whereas the commercial world is driven by a functional imperative to sell to mass consumers, the editorial circuit is driven by its own insular taste, picking up on the idiosyncrasies of elite producers who play off each other within tight social networks.

Within this *beauty world reversed*, editorial producers disengage mainstream reality in attempts to construct an imaginary world to which their brands belong. They prize distinction, which they narrowly

define in elite terms. In this world, everyday bodies and their racial diversity have no place.

An invisible hand of racism guides the market, which producers understand as a rational, efficient force against which they have no power. Within our contemporary *laissez-faire* racial ethos, the seemingly natural force of the market ensures the invisibility of racism. As a discourse, "the market" is a powerful justification for producers to explain their preferences for models. Their idea of the market naturalizes their preference for white bodies, rendering the issue of race invisible in the process. By referencing the supposedly objective rules of supply and demand, producers ignore the sociality and cultural meanings so crucial to their aesthetic choices. Yet the economic realm is hardly distinct from the social world. The world of fashion, like any market, is a social entity governed as much by economic principles as by cultural values. Not only is the market embedded within social ties, as economic sociologists have long been arguing,⁶² but markets *are social and cultural constructions*. The fashion market is composed of social ties entangled with cultural belief systems. Cultural meanings and stereotypes filter into organizational conventions, where they shape producers' informal knowledge, habits, and work routines. Any cultural product like fashion is the outcome of this kind of shared culture of production.

Fashion producers are not particularly racist or sexist people. Indeed, theirs is a well-intentioned liberal world, with self-proclaimed artists and urban bohemians. They are caught in the self-perpetuating cycle of production, struggling to make decisions under enormous ambiguity and basing their decisions on what has worked in the past, constrained by what they can only imagine will be successful in the future. The "look" of whiteness and size zero may not be the intended outcome for any one producer; it is institutionally reproduced and made durable by conventions. With their professional reputations on the line, producers believe there is little room to be political, or to second-guess collectively agreed-upon conventions to select the "appropriate" looks. Nor do they seem especially interested in trying. Indeed, they *allow* themselves to be guided by an invisible hand of racism. The irony is that in the editorial circuit, where producers have the most creative freedom to construct edgy looks free from consumer demographics or mainstream expectations, they are in a stronger grip of institutionalized racism.

Racism and sexism are not stable identities or categories of people; rather, they are tacit understandings, intertwined hegemonies that structure our vision and guide our actions without our full awareness. While bookers and clients are wedded to racial equality, they are skilled in expressing new, color-blind forms of intertwined racism and sexism with an air of liberalism and equality. Fashion producers are stumped to figure out why there aren't any *really good* models of color around, but the question is quite a generic one: Why aren't there any superlative [blank] of color around? The blank may be endlessly filled: Why aren't there any more CEOs of color, or school principals, or sociologists, or doormen? Fashion modeling is a telling arena to examine tacit biases, because here is a site that has no formal entry criteria based on credentials such as diplomas or certificates. There are very few informal barriers like cultural or social capital—all past and present blockades to minorities entering white-dominated positions. All the same, there just aren't enough *really good* models of color, 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.

Bookers and clients cannot or, more likely, will not recognize this. Instead they diffuse blame and social responsibility to one another, imagining themselves helpless against the inevitable strength and rationality of “the market.” But the market does not exist on its own. It too is structured by cultural beliefs. Cultural understandings of race, class, and gender are at the heart of how producers work in this industry. Like a fish in water, producers swim in whiteness. It is the air they breathe, the invisible yardstick against which they judge all bodies. In this culture, whiteness is at once everything and nothing.⁶³ Bookers and clients are cultural producers in the sense that they are creators of culture—they reproduce culture, invoking and reworking our shared social positions of class, sexuality, and race when looking for the right look.

CHAPTER 6

Runway to Gender

SOMETHING TO WATCH

I'm seated in a cramped lobby of a studio in Manhattan's West Side, with about ten other young women waiting to be called in for a casting for a designer fragrance campaign. My casting sheet for the day, filled with details for nine additional appointments, notes that at this audition, models are asked to bring their bathing suits. It's been about thirty minutes since the door last opened to admit the previous round of models to audition. In several short spurts, loud music thunders from the studio. It's a popular reggaeton club hit by Sean Paul, playing in thirty-second intervals: *Shake that things*, *Miss Kana Kana*, *shake that thing*. When the door finally opens, spilling out candidates, a seated model asks, “What'd you have to do in there?”

The models explain, “You have to dance!”

“What do you mean we dance?” asks another.

“Just do your own thing, it's easy.”

With that, the models leave, and a woman in charge ushers the next group of five candidates into the large studio. She directs us over to a man in a white dress shirt and black slacks, seated on a leather sofa in the corner of the large studio space. He is never introduced, nor is his title given, but he must be the boss, because he examines our books, one by one, takes a card, and looks at us briefly as we stand in a line before him. “Thank you,” he says.