

# Intersectionality in Fashion Studies

*Hajar Agrad, April 2023*

Thinking through Fashion takes on important thinkers in the history of humanities and social studies and applies their findings to fashion as part of an effort to legitimise fashion studies (Thomas-Hayes, 2018) and enrich its multidisciplinary aspect. The book follows a chronological order and touches upon important topics such as capitalism. Given that the industry falls short in many areas, resulting in systemic oppression of a huge part of its contributors in so many ways, the book should address theories that frame societal issues within fashion studies. People experience these social issues differently, conditional on their identity and circumstances. The underlying economic system of fashion upholds white supremacy and relies heavily on exploitation. The exploitation of talent, labour, resources and culture. Often, the same group that suffers from dangerous working conditions at one end of the supply chain suffers from the consequences of overproduction and polluting practices of fashion. These people have complex identities that make them fall victim to compound oppression and further marginalisation. Looking at fashion, the voices that have been amplified the most are the voices of the privileged: white, rich, mostly male and/or conventionally attractive. In fashion studies, more and more women are taking power and making space for themselves, driving conversations about important topics, notably decoloniality and sustainability. The dominant race leading these discourses remains white. Looking at the list of key thinkers suggested by the book suggests that the people best suited to provide a framework to think about fashion are white European and, for the most part, men.

## **Introduction of Intersectionality**

Kimberlé Crenshaw (2017) argues that different individual identities dictate how people experience life, sometimes discrimination and other times benefits. These identities situate people differently to the likelihood of being marginalised. She presents intersectionality as a frame that takes into account the intersecting identities that further marginalise groups more than other groups sharing a similar identity, be it race, gender or class. The term was coined from a case Crenshaw was studying where black women were discriminated against not as black people and not as women, but as women who are black. She also uses the anniversary of the right to vote to portray how black women face gender discrimination from one direction and racial discrimination from another. White women used their race as an argument to fight for the right to vote, and black men their masculinity, disenfranchising the black woman (Crenshaw, 2017).

The frame through which we think about fashion should be broad enough to recognise overlapping social dynamics that create multiple levels of injustice, resulting in challenges unique to each individual. Failing to acknowledge intersections of social justice problems disregards certain members of marginalised groups from the conversation.

Within the fashion context, intersectionality is important to approach issues like exploitation, tokenisation, and performative activism.

### **Intersectional Environmentalism**

Women of colour are one of the biggest contributors to fashion. They make up 80% of the 74 million textile workers worldwide (Peppermint, 2021). Yet, they are severely exploited and underrepresented, and suffer from environmental racism. They face gender-based inequalities resulting in pay gaps and a domestic burden.

While garment workers in the global south are subject to dangerous working conditions and earning unlivable wages, they happen to be mostly lower-class women. As if being poor isn't bad enough, being a poor woman in a third-world country comes with extra challenges. Culture contributes to marginalising those women. Education, access to healthcare, child marriage, child pregnancy, and harassment are a few of the problems these women face.

While the West overproduces and consumes, people and natural resources are exploited. Recognising the collision of social injustices within an exploitative system helps create solutions and systems that include all the affected groups. Leah Thomas defines intersectional environmentalism as an “inclusive version of environmentalism” that “identifies the ways in which injustices happening to marginalised communities and the earth are interconnected. It brings injustices done to the most vulnerable communities, and the earth, to the forefront and does not minimise or silence social inequality.” (Bauck, 2020)

### **Intersectional Way to Inclusion**

Fashion has come a long way in terms of representation on the runway. It still needs more effort on the body diversity side. Seeing a somewhat diverse set of models strolling down the runway, but then an all-white team behind the scenes, begs the question: Is the love for diversity only for show? Literally. Is the (able, thin) body of colour only good for showing the clothes the white creative genius designed? Not for making them (outside of sweatshops), making decisions, driving conversations. Adding up undesirable traits in fashion further complicates the hurdles an individual faces in the industry. A disabled plus-size model of colour faces more discrimination than a thinner, able-bodied one. While both face racism and tokenism, one is further marginalised because of their interesting appearance identifiers. Less job opportunities, less spots to fill. Implementing inclusion through an intersectional approach means to address barriers that keep the Other in the margins in order to include all talents in any positions they are qualified for.



*Contrast in Inclusion – Jacquemus Show.*

### **Crenshaw in Conversation with Fanon**

While Frantz Fanon deserves a chapter for his contributions to decolonial thought, a conversation between his arguments and Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality would make an interesting addition to fashion studies. Thinking about modernity in a decolonial context, dehumanisation and internalised racism and tokenisation, while recognising the layers of oppression certain groups experience in contrast to others sharing the same race, gender or class.



*British Vogue February 2022 Cover.*

The British Vogue 2022 February issue (Fetto, 2022) would be a great example of the importance of having that conversation. While this issue was meant to celebrate black models, it uplifts a certain standard of beauty black women have been fighting. Further darkening the models' skin tone in post-production is interpreted as a commodification of the black body, rendering it as a shiny statuesque object. Centring the light skin model and having her wear some colour as opposed to the rest of the models insinuates colourism, the superiority of the light-skin beauty. Furthermore, styling the models in European-style wigs may communicate that black hair is not *good* hair, another prevalent issue within the black community. (Mahadevan, 2022)

Finally, all models featured were thin. With the rise of the Y2K aesthetic in the last year, is fashion reverting back to the white heroin-thin model and throwing out racial ambiguity? The Kardashians removed their implants and dissolved their fillers, shedding from the black features they appropriated and profited from for years...

A big part of the team responsible for the shoot were (most probably) black/people of colour. While the intention may not have been to diminish the models and the black woman general, the interpretations of the photos shed light on challenges around representing black womanhood. I can't help but think: what are the limits of critique? Is there such thing as being too critical? Should creatives dissect their concepts and think about all possible interpretations before executing their visions?

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