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THE *UGLY SIDE* OF THE *MODELING* BUSINESS

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On a chilly afternoon last winter, the atmosphere inside Club USA--one of New York City's hottest nightspots--matched the outdoor temperature, but for a different reason: America's Black supermodels were in revolt. The Black Girls Coalition (BGC), a consortium of fashion models formed in 1988 by supermodel Iman and former model Bethann Hardison (now owner of the *modeling* agency Bethann Management Co., Inc.) to aid the homeless, had chosen this site for a press conference to speak out on an issue that's been hidden beneath the glamour and glitter of the profession: namely, racism within the fashion and *modeling* business.

About 20 strong, almost all of BGC's members were in attendance--among them Karen Alexander, Cynthia Bailey, Tyra Banks, Kersti Bowser, Naomi Campbell, Peggy Dillard, Iman, Coco Mitchell, Gail O Neill, Beverly Peele, Phina, Karla Otis, Akure Wall, Veronica Webb, Roshumba Williams and the designated leader, Bethann Hardison.

Also present were more than 100 members of the press representing Black and White American and European publications, who got an earful from the Black beauties gathered to expose the industry's *ugly side*. Accustomed to being seen and not heard, the models--who for the most part were stripped of their ready-to-work glamour-girl makeup--nonetheless took their turn at the podium and spoke candidly about the everyday injustices that exist within their "workplace."

Among the specific grievances addressed: the gross underrepresentation of African-Americans in fashion advertising (television commercials, billboards, magazines, catalogs, in-store promotions), designer shows and even the editorial pages of consumer magazines. "People don't realize there are hundreds of jobs related to the fashion industry, from being a makeup artist to scouting locations for a photo shoot," said a Black fashion editor at a women's magazine. "But you can practically count on both hands the number of Blacks who have any of these jobs in what's become a very closed arena." This is despite the fact that collectively African-Americans

spend over \$16 billion on clothing annually, according to the Consumer Expenditure Survey, and will represent approximately 13 percent of the total population by the year 2000, according to the U. S. Census Bureau.

WHAT PRICE BEAUTY?

As "soldiers" at the forefront of the style wars, the models also expressed outrage at other more subtle but unmistakable signs of racism that exist in their field: everything from the lack of Black behind-the-scenes fashion personnel--art directors, editors, designers, photographers--to being controlled around the clock right down to how they wear their locks, or indeed, told whether or not they can even wear "locks." Many, instead, are forced to wear wigs, falls and weaves.

"In more than ten years as a model," explained Coco Mitchell, "I've always had to look like what other people wanted me to look like, never how I wanted to." Most of the models admitted to being under pressure to have flowing hair that emulates that of the White models. Two have refused to give in to such pressure, however: Roshumba Williams and British-born Phina both wear their hair natural and closely cropped. Phina, in fact, stepped on these shores wearing her hair in spiky twists. "I wear my hair like this because I want to--not because I am militant, as I am so often told," she explains. "I think it's really sad that time and time again I'm asked to adhere to a certain look or value that is justifiable only to certain people." Adds Roshumba, "I'm constantly arriving at a photographer's studio and being told that I have to wear a wig." Roshumba, though, is one of the few Black models who skill gets a lot of work while sporting her short natural.

The grievances of the Black models were dramatically supported in a ground breaking study conducted by the City of New York's Department of Consumer Affairs in 1991. The report, titled "Invisible People," looked at how often Blacks and other ethnic groups were used in magazine and catalog advertising--and the findings were shocking. A paltry 3.4 percent of all consumer-magazine advertisements depicted African-Americans--despite the fact that we comprise approximately 11.3 percent of the readership of all consumer magazines and 12.5 percent of the U.S. population.

In addition to its study, New York City's Department of Consumer Affairs conducted a special survey of repeat advertisers in 634 issues of general-circulation magazines and found that some of the most prolific fashion advertisers rarely, if ever, depict Blacks (or Asian-Americans) in their ads. And when they do, it is usually as stereotypes, not consumers. The companies included Calvin Klein (out of 148 ad insertions reviewed, none depicted "identifiable minorities"), Perry Ellis, Giorgio Armani, Gucci and Guess? by Georges Marciano. In the case of Calvin Klein, one of his ad campaigns in particular--which features White rapper Marky Mark and White model Kate Moss profiling in low-slung, oversize jeans--doesn't exactly have the rap-music community singing "Hip-hop hooray." After all, it was the Black rappers who created-and still perpetuate--the urbanized, flavored look, yet no major advertising campaigns have come their way.

When asked about the Marky Mark advertising campaign, Calvin Klein asserted that "it wasn't about Marky Mark being a White or Black rapper, but more about his body than his music. He had been wearing the underwear in his concerts and the ads were capitalizing on something he

started." Marky Mark's latest contract with Klein is triple the amount of the first--and Klein's sales are up about 30 percent.

One of the reasons that the gross inequity in fashion advertisements persists, says Consumer Affairs Commissioner Mark Green, is that the Department of Consumer Affairs has no legal jurisdiction to require that ads reflect the racial makeup of magazine readership in America. There are also no laws on the books that require advertisers to "fill quotas," although according to a survey of 470 marketing and media executives conducted by Advertising Age, the trade publication for the advertising industry, 54.8 percent agreed that there were too few Blacks in print ads, period.

THE EFFECT ON SELF-ESTEEM

There can be no doubt that the exclusion of Blacks from ads has had a negative impact, especially on our youths, who often feel little connection to the larger society. According to Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, a journalism professor at Texas A & M University and the author of an upcoming book on Blacks in advertising, "There's been a drastic erosion of self-esteem with young African-Americans--and it's partially because the images they see of themselves are either negative, offensive or not there." Adds Michele Wallace, author of the book *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (Routledge, 1990), "Not seeing our images reproduced--in particular in ads that constitute such a visible medium in our society--suggests to our children that we have no power, that having power is inconceivable."

Other areas of inequity, the models say, are fashion shows and even fashion layouts in magazines--and most notably fashion-magazine covers, on which Black models are rarely seen. For example, supermodel Tyra Banks, who has appeared on 17 magazine covers in Europe, has graced only two in the United States (including the June 1993 issue of this magazine). During the press conference for *Sports Illustrated's* venerable swimsuit issue last winter, Banks, who was the only Black model featured in the issue, noted that *Sports Illustrated* has never had a Black or Asian model on the cover of the swimsuit issue in its nearly 30 years of publishing the special issue.

As for designer shows, at the fall-winter 1993 collections that took place in March in New York City, fewer Black models were seen on the runways than in any recent season gone by. (Coincidentally, many Black supermodels were seen for the first time in years either without weaves or with drastically shorter weaves--including Naomi Campbell and Beverly Peele.) Calvin Klein's collection, for example, featured only one model of color, Aya Thorgren, who is also one of the three models to appear in Revlon's ColorStyle ads. White designer Jennifer George, however, bucked the current grunge trend and tomboy, waiflike wave of innocent White models by using almost all Black models to show her collection.

One Black model who can afford to take a more militant position and turn down jobs from designers she considers racist is supermodel Naomi Campbell. "What I've started to do with certain designers who simply say they don't want Black girls--not individual models--is not do their shows and not wear their clothes, even in editorials [magazine fashion layouts that feature the clothes of a particular designer]," Campbell said at the BGC press conference. "I don't see

why we [Black models] should make their clothes look good and then not be represented by them in any way." Campbell, however, one of the most popular and highest-paid models of any color in the industry, is still in demand, even when she turns down work. This is a claim few other Black models can make, and it limits their ability to take controversial stands.

ON THE GOOD SIDE

It would be unfair and inaccurate to suggest that there has been no progress for Blacks in the fashion industry during the last few years. Witness, for instance, the spanking-new Armani Exchange (AX) billboards and fashion ads profiling the cool beauty of Marvin Gaye's daughter, Nona Gaye. Or the new Ralph Lauren Safari fragrance campaign with Tyra Banks (one of the first high-profile designer-fragrance campaigns depicting a Black model in recent history) resplendent in florals amid colonial African chic. Or Liz Claiborne Jewelry ads (also with Tyra). Fernando Sanchez's lingerie ads feature sultry Kara Young, and Roshumba Williams is on the pages of the Tweeds catalogs and in the Robert Lee Morris jewelry ads for Saks Fifth Avenue. On the downside, however, none of these manufacturers advertises in any of the Black publications.

The beauty industry, which has been somewhat better than the fashion industry in recognizing the financial clout of Black women, made history when some of the biggest cosmetics firms all launched major advertising campaigns featuring products for Black women: Maybelline (Shades of You), Cover Girl and Revlon (ColorStyle). Even better: Both Revlon and Cover Girl awarded Black supermodels Veronica Webb and Lana Ogilvie, respectively, exclusive contracts to advertise their products--a lucrative domain previously reserved for such White supermodels as Christy Turlington and Linda Evangelista.

In the final analysis, what it all comes down to is power--the power to change the things we can, and the power to choose what we will change. We can choose the clothes, accessories and beauty products we buy, for instance. And we can write letters to fashion and beauty manufacturers if those products or publications don't reflect our image.

Unfortunately, when approached by New York City's Department of Consumer Affairs following its study on the lack of people of color in print advertising, not one magazine or non-Black ad agency or advertiser would agree to sign a general pledge to depict people of color more accurately on their pages and in their advertisements. "We can only hope that our new appeal to advertisers will encourage them to act in their own economic interest as well as in the public interest by including more people of color in their product promotions," stated Commissioner Mark Green. "Ad agencies can exert considerable influence on the selection of models used in ads, but advertisers pay the bills and ultimately call the shots." And as Bethann Hardison points out "It's a rare White person who helps people of color forge ahead. We have to raise their consciousness and appeal to their humanity. "

The Black male model Alvin Clayton-Fernandes does not order from those mail-order catalogs that never or seldom use Black male models. Civil-rights attorney Flo Kennedy believes in the power of the boycott: "If Blacks aren't represented in a particular clothing company's advertisements, don't buy from them," she says simply.

Ultimately, as consumers we can decide where to spend our fashion dollars. Now, more than ever, there are African-American designers manufacturing style that's available at retail or in catalogs or can be custom-made. From hip-hop gear to glamour gowns, African-American designers, such as Cross Colours, Byron Lars, Tracy Reese for Magaschoni, Shaka King and Ahneva Ahneva in California, are at the forefront of our style (see this month's fashion story).

Only when "buying Black" becomes a regular part of our economic lifestyle will mainstream style setters get the message and recognize that racism is not only out of fashion in the beauty business but also will not be tolerated by all those people of color who help keep the bottom line black in a multi-billion-dollar clothing industry.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Bethann Hardison, center, organizer of the Black Girls Coalition (BGC), flanked by models Veronica Webb (left) and Iman On opening page, models Tyra Banks, Kersti Bowser, Roshumba Williams, Gail O'Neill (seated); and Phina, Cynthia Bailey and Coco Mitchell (standing) speak out at the press conference the BGC held last winter to confront racism in their business.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Black models have gone from the runway to the front line in bringing the issue of racism in the fashion and *modeling* industries into the spotlight. Herewith, a report on the bad and the *ugly* on Seventh avenue

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