

# Review: Diversity NOW! Fashion & Race with Kimberly Jenkins

<https://doi.org/10.38055/FS010203>

By Jaclyn Marcus

**Abstract:** The following article is a review of the 2018 Diversity Now! Lecture, entitled “Unleash the Power of Fashion to Challenge Racism,” led by Kimberly Jenkins and held by Toronto Metropolitan University’s Centre for Fashion Diversity and Social Change. Jenkins is a lecturer at Parsons University, where she first created and continues to teach her undergraduate course “Fashion and Race,” is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Pratt Institute, and a curator, anthropologist, and art historian. Jenkins is also the creator of the online digital humanities project entitled *The Fashion and Race Databases* as well as co-constructing and presenting a lecture and workshop series known as “Fashion and Justice,” among involvement in many other groups, activities, and media that help to further representation and diversity in fashion education, research, and the fashion industry. The review covers Part 1 and Part 2 of her lecture, “Fashion and Race” and a visual analysis exercise, “The Power of Representation.”

Keywords:

Fashion Education  
Race  
Diversity  
Representation  
Fashion Industry

# Introduction: Diversity NOW!

Each year, Toronto Metropolitan University's Centre for Fashion Diversity & Social Change hosts Diversity NOW!, a lecture focused on the importance of creating diversity within the fashion industry. This year's sixth guest lecturer was Kimberly Jenkins, who presented on challenging racism in, and through, fashion in March 2018 at Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) during her talk entitled "Unleash the Power of Fashion to Challenge Racism" (Diversity NOW!). Jenkins is a lecturer at Parsons University, where she first created and continues to teach her undergraduate course "Fashion and Race," is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Pratt Institute, and a curator, anthropologist, and art historian. Jenkins is the creator of the online digital humanities project entitled *The Fashion and Race Database* as well as co-constructing and presenting a lecture and workshop series known as "Fashion and Justice," among involvement in many other groups, activities, and media that help to further representation and diversity in fashion education, research, and the fashion industry.

In short, Kim Jenkins is a force of nature whose work I first encountered when I began my Master's degree in Fashion at Toronto Metropolitan University, upon learning about *The Fashion and Race Database*. This open-source website became and remains one of my most valuable resources, providing a breadth of cultural perspectives and recognizing diversity in the spheres of clothing and dress through articles, essays, and book recommendations as part of its larger database. When I learned that Jenkins would be the 2018 speaker for Diversity NOW!, I was excited to attend her lecture and have the chance to share her insights with the *Fashion Studies* readership. As expected, Jenkins' presentation left me feeling thoughtful, with a wealth of resources for continuing to study and implement diversity in fashion, and inspired to continue having these conversations across the discipline.

# Unleash the Power of Fashion to Challenge Racism

As she began her presentation, Jenkins addressed a key question the fashion industry is currently being faced with: *Why?* Why is the studying and understanding of representation and diversity in the fashion industry so important? On a more personal level, what has driven Jenkins to conduct the research and work that she has? For Jenkins, the importance of this work finds its roots in challenging the dominant narratives she herself faced as a student of colour, and noticing that there was a gap that needed to be filled in the narratives being shared in fashion history, theory, and research. It was this desire that prompted her undergraduate course, "Fashion and Race." Throughout her own experiences as a student, Jenkins realized that fashion and race were not being talked about in the study of fashion and the canon of fashion history; so, she decided to centralize these topics herself.

Jenkins' lecture covered four main topics, split into two sections of the presentation: in part one, the construction of race and the racialized body in fashion, the power of style, and how race intersects with fashion in business, and, in part two, a visual analysis exercise to be conducted by the students and led by Jenkins.

Before beginning, Jenkins shared an empowering message with students: "For all of you here, if there's something that you're not seeing in a curriculum, or something that you're not seeing happening in the fashion system, sometimes you just have to build it. You just have to create it yourself."

# Part 1: Fashion and Race

## Why Representation and Style Matters

In understanding the racialized body within fashion history, Jenkins takes two words as key points of departure: “civilization” and “modernity.” As Jenkins explains, the nineteenth century saw the beginning of the division and classification of people according to these terms, with dress, accessories, and appearance as important signifiers of these statuses. It is for this reason that fashion becomes such an important influencer of representation. Throughout the first portion of her lecture, entitled “The Construction and Idea of Race and the Racialized Body in Fashion,” Jenkins moves through fashion’s impact on diversity across history, and its continued influence in the twenty-first century. The second portion of the lecture, entitled “The Power of Style: ‘Carving Out Space’” offers a response to this decentralizing of diverse voices in the industry. As Jenkins explains, “In a Westernized, dichotomous power struggle and hierarchal arrangement, there’s ‘legitimate’ power that dominates and there’s the Other which works to resist... this establishes a social relationship,” and style becomes a strategy for carving out space and harnessing power. Jenkins points to strategies that have been employed in the past as a response to marginalization in fashion; for example, dressing audaciously, challenging the notion of “appropriate” style in specific settings. Approaches like this one can help to utilize fashion as a means of resistance and empowerment.

This concept ties as well into cultural appropriation, and protecting the assets of cultures and voices who have worked to be seen within Western society. In the third portion of the lecture, entitled “How Race Intersects with the Business of Fashion: Misrepresentation and Cultural Appropriation,” Jenkins discusses moments where these boundaries have been disrespected. Jenkins breaks cultural appropriation into three categories: object appropriation (where objects from one culture are taken by another), style appropriation (where aesthetic elements from another culture are employed by another), and motif appropriation (where a part of a culture is integrated into another’s creative work). For Jenkins, the question to ask when considering these issues is who is benefiting from the appropriation or action, and who is sharing the power. In understanding these power dynamics that were first established as part of Western history, Jenkins enables students to interpret the wide variety of images that are dominant within visual culture, and particularly within the fashion industry.

## Part 2: Visual Analysis Exercise

### The Power of Representation

Part 2 of Jenkins' lecture, entitled "The Power of Representation," focused on student involvement, effectively allowing the lecture attendees to discuss and analyze images found in recent popular culture and media that reflected the topics presented throughout the first portion of the presentation. When explaining how stereotypes work in images, Jenkins asks students to consider moments where the visual may be *essentializing*, excluding others by fixing boundaries and misrepresenting reality, and *pathologizing*, conducting symbolic violence on the racialized body. Students were instructed to consider these regimes of power when studying the images presented on screen, though where the images themselves came from are often considered the most banal of sources: clothing brands and fashion magazines.

Jenkins covered five different case studies with the classroom, ranging from the June 2007 *Vogue* editorial featuring Kiera Knightly and photographed by Alfred Elgort, which showed Kiera standing above Black women, wearing a safari-inspired outfit, and H&M's infamous "coolest monkey in the jungle" sweatshirt worn by a Black child in 2018, which was first advertised and later pulled from the company's media following public outcry. Using examples spanning over 10 years, Jenkins' presentation demonstrates that the fashion industry continues to be largely ignorant to representations of race. These case studies are particularly poignant given that they examine voices with power in the industry, seen through the examples of well-known, wealthy brands like *Vogue* and H&M. As Jenkins demonstrates, as consumers we have to ask ourselves who is approving these projects, and why no one with a deciding voice, as far as we know as the potential consumer, is questioning the messages being put forth by these images. It is for this reason that representation remains as important, as vital, as ever.



**Figure 1:** Kimberly Jenkins during her presentation for the sixth annual Diversity NOW! lecture. 13 March 2018, Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University), Toronto, Ontario.

## Conclusion

Jenkins' lecture ended by returning to her "Fashion and Race" undergraduate course. In her class, fashion history is integral to understanding the sociocultural contexts surrounding race in fashion. Jenkins therefore includes what she calls an "intervention in representation," where, whenever a new decade is taught in her course, students are able to volunteer to submit photos of their family members from that time period to be included in the presentation. The students are in control of this poignant portion of the lecture, and explain their family history and background to their classmates. This is another strategy Jenkins utilizes to bring diverse voices to the forefront of fashion history. As Jenkins explains, in her class "everyone has a place in this narrative of fashion history, and together we are decentralizing fashion history."

It is clear that Jenkin's work remains urgently needed in fashion studies, given the continuous privileging of Western voices within the industry; recent events, from Dolce & Gabbana's November 2018 "DG Loves China" campaign, called out for its racist, stereotypical imagery and resulting in the cancellation of their Shanghai fashion show due to public response, to the balaclava sweater with red lips that called to mind Blackface imagery released by Gucci in February 2019, pulled from their site and prompting the brand to launch a long-term plan for integrating diversity into their company as a whole, demonstrate this. As a start to their new initiative, Gucci invited Jenkins to Milan this past month to lecture at their company head-quarters, where she delivered a presentation on cultural awareness and representation in fashion. It is Jenkins' work that is helping to bring diverse voices to the table in the fashion industry, guiding us towards a future of fashion we can all be proud of.

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To watch Jenkins' lecture in its entirety online, you can access the Centre for Fashion Diversity and Social Change's YouTube channel [here](#).

This year's seventh annual Diversity NOW! lecture will be taking place this month, on **March 5th, 2019 from 6:00-9:00 PM with artist-scholar Dr. Madison Moore**. I'm looking forward to what I'm certain will be another powerful conversation, enabling students to encourage representation in fashion and empowering others to create social change within the fashion industry. Follow the Centre for Fashion Diversity and Social Change on Twitter at @ryersonFDSC and on Instagram at @fashionsocialchange for more details on this year's Diversity NOW! lecture.

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# Author Biography



## Jaclyn Marcus

Jaclyn Marcus is a PhD student at Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) and York University's joint Communication and Culture program in Toronto, Canada, researching intersections between fashion, literature, and material culture. Under the supervision of Dr. Irene Gammel, Jaclyn studied the impact of dress on social identity in twentieth-century adolescent literature as part of her MA in Fashion at Toronto Metropolitan University, and continues to demonstrate the interdisciplinary connections between dress and literature. Jaclyn holds the role of editorial assistant for the open access, academic journal *Fashion Studies*, co-edited by Dr. Ben Barry and Dr. Alison Matthews David, and is honoured to have joined Toronto Metropolitan University's Modern Literature and Culture Research Centre in 2016. Jaclyn has shared her research at international conferences and was presented with the Spoke Gives Back Graduate Award in Fashion at Toronto Metropolitan University for the 2018/2019 year.

### Article Citation

Marcus, Jaclyn. "Review: Diversity NOW! Fashion & Race with Kimberly Jenkins." *Fashion Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2019, pp. 1-9, [www.fashionstudies.ca/fashion-and-race-with-kimberly-jenkins](http://www.fashionstudies.ca/fashion-and-race-with-kimberly-jenkins), <https://doi.org/10.38055/FS010203>