

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

The fashion world has been rocked by recent racist incidents at a time when Michelle Obama and actress Lupita Nyong'o, two of the most prominent women of color in the world today, are recognized as trendsetting fashion icons. To help us understand the complexities of race and haute couture today is Professor Elizabeth Wissinger, a faculty member at the Borough of Manhattan Community College and the Graduate Center CUNY where she teaches fashion studies and sociology.

Professor Wissinger's research focuses on technology, fashion, and embodiment. Her current research of how wearable technology genders bodies affiliates her with the think tank Data and Society. She is author of "This Year's Model: Fashion, Media, and the Making of Glamour," NYU Press 2015. Welcome to the Thought Project, Professor Wissinger.

Elizabeth Wissi:

Hello. It's great to be here.

Tanya Domi:

Wonderful to see you. We've been talking for years. This is the first moment to meet. Just recently, the fashion company Prada had displayed a line of accessories and products in their Soho shop. These were noted for their "blackface antebellum style," which is pre-Civil War. Following complaints, the company issued a statement indicating its "abhorrence to racist imagery." They had the unfortunate observer who was an attorney with the Center for Constitutional Rights, which is the oldest anti-racist advocacy organization in the country, and she did in fact give a interview to the Gothamist who broke the news.

What are your thoughts about this?

Elizabeth Wissi:

Any time a large corporation or brand makes a misstep like this, and they have to endure, not endure, but they have to get through the ensuing uproar, one has to ask how the heck did this happen? How could such an intensely image-conscious company make such a misstep and not realize it? And in that same article that you're quoting, it did say that she asked if anyone who is of color worked at the store and maybe noticed this problem, and she was told rather candidly and surprisingly so that that employee ... there was a black employee who said, "This is problematic," and that employee no longer works at this store.

So, when we're thinking about the origins of these kinds of problems, one of the most simple solutions that we've been talking about in fashion studies and the fashion industry more broadly is "Hey, guys, how can we get some more

diversity in the room?" And thinking about how to get more diversity into the room brings up a lot of the longer-term issues with fashion and race that have been plaguing the industry since the beginning of its inception in terms of how the aspirational image that fashion tries to project is constructed.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, since the beginning of the country, when wealthy men owned slaves, some of those slave men dressed as dandies. This is in the 18th century because they were dressed very nicely because they were owned by a very rich slave owner. So that history goes all the way back to that moment in the research that I did do.

Elizabeth Wissi: Tanya, actually I'd love to interject.

Tanya Domi: Please.

Elizabeth Wissi: Because there's a student in the masters program, in the MALS program here at CUNY in the fashion track who did some really amazing research where she looked at the wanted bills, the wanted posters for escaped slaves. And one of the most significant aspects of those wanted posters were a cataloging of the clothing that the slave was wearing as a way of spelling out what property was lost because the slave was property that was lost, and the clothing that the slave was wearing was a way to document the value of the loss and also help track down the slave because clothing was ...

Tanya Domi: That's chilling. That's chilling.

Elizabeth Wissi: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: How interesting. This Prada incident in Soho last month is really quite a juxtaposition to two women who are without a doubt fashion trendsetters, who have icon status in our country. One is actress Lupita Nyong'o, and the other, of course, is Michelle Obama, former First Lady who's now on tour with a number one bestselling book for her memoir "Becoming."

Nyong'o in this past year in 2018 was touted as really the queen of the red carpet in all the award shows, and when Glamour reported on what she was wearing at the Oscars, they referred to her in headlines as "Total queen. Bow down." It was quite a splash about her. What do you say about this juxtaposition? We can be two things at the same time, but it is an interesting moment to see a black woman elevated in this way.

Elizabeth Wissi: What's interesting about Nyong'o in part is that she's an African-African woman, as opposed to African-American woman. I noticed in my research in the fashion modeling industry that was an issue that came up again and again with black models, that the African-American models found that they were received differently and were not as able to create the attractive image of exoticism that

seemed to have a currency in that world, much more so than being an African-American model.

In fact, I interviewed an African-American model who changed the way she ... she changed the name that she gave so it made it seem like she was an African-African model, which she found kind of paved the way for her being accepted in certain circles that were not as open to an African-American model.

Tanya Domi: So that appropriation of exoticism is really ... that is such a double-edged, triple-edged ...

Elizabeth Wissi: Even using the word "queen" is a double-edged word in and of itself.

Tanya Domi: That's true. That's true, you're right.

Elizabeth Wissi: It's so loaded, and that she's an African queen. They're not saying that, but that seems to be playing into part of what's going on with the elevation.

Tanya Domi: It's a subtle inference.

Elizabeth Wissi: Yeah, and probably the person who wrote that didn't think of those connections.

Tanya Domi: Correct.

Elizabeth Wissi: But here in our analysis, we're seeing that there really is kind of a loaded set of imagery being attached to Nyong'o. It also helps that Nyong'o's features are small and not associated ... I mean, my students ...

Tanya Domi: With caricatures of ...

Elizabeth Wissi: With caricatures of blackness or Africanness.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Elizabeth Wissi: And her body type is more of a fashion model body type than a ... I mean, with social media and the internet and the democratization of fashion and size diversity or diversity awareness and fighting for different types of bodies to be considered fashionable, it's interesting that, yes, she's African-American, and, yes, she's the queen of the red carpet, but her body is a body type that's not controversial at all. It's the type of bodies that ...

Tanya Domi: It's classic.

Elizabeth Wissi: It's classic, skinny, small-breasted.

Tanya Domi: It's a classic model's body, right?

Elizabeth Wissi: Accepted by fashion, yeah.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Elizabeth Wissi: Yeah, and so that juxtaposition though with Prada having their ... I mean, they were accused of a black Sambo type imagery in their windows, I think does stem in part ... When Kendall Jenner was ... there was that uproar about her giving a Pepsi to a police officer in the ad for Pepsi that got pulled after the controversy about her protesting and then kind of making it all right by giving the police officer a Pepsi like "Yeah, we're all friends," that issue and the Prada issue, I think it's a little simple, but I think there is a big piece of the puzzle that has to do with the lack of diversity in the planning stages of these types of marketing plays that just doesn't happen to what's ...

I mean, if you look at Michelle Obama and Lupita Nyong'o, we see what regular Americans are interested in and find attractive and want to elevate to icons.

Tanya Domi: True.

Elizabeth Wissi: Whereas if we look at luxury and high fashion planning and trying to play along that edge of what's cutting-edge and controversial but also acceptable, sometimes they really step wrong because if you read the ... Prada purses that caused the ... or whatever they were, they were little purses and keychain charms and things like that.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Elizabeth Wissi: They were billing those as ... they were trying to play with this machine biology mixing that's coming down the pipe that's way in the future. A lot of the high-fashion brands are playing with this. I think it was Montcler had a gorgeous fashion model whose name is escaping me right now. A gorgeous fashion model in bed with ... I think her name's Sophia, the robot that was given citizenship in Saudi Arabia. She's a robot with a woman's face, and she's basically human-looking down to her waist. And they were in bed rolling around, and it was kind of this saying like ...

Tanya Domi: That's wild.

Elizabeth Wissi: We have to accept the robot, so Prada's effort was to make these little creatures that they said were part biological, part AI or robotics or machine.

Tanya Domi: Artificial intelligence.

Elizabeth Wissi: Yeah, and Prada DNA. So they were trying to get to the very edge of what's coming in the future, but they totally were tone-deaf about the outcome of what their reaching for the future looked like. And maybe, if there'd been more

diversity in the room planning, somebody might have red-flagged this obvious imagery, which is so offensive.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, and I think that it just is really interesting how this repeats itself over and over, every once in a while, some type of incident involving race and fashion. There's a list of them. The article included them. It's like who are they getting in advertising, and who are they getting in publicity, and people who look at this before it hits the store floor? It's really ... you're right, your comment about such a conscious, a sensitive type of industry, and they don't get it. They just don't get it. When they miss-hit, they miss-hit big.

Elizabeth Wissi: Big. But they're constantly trying to push an edge of controversy. I'm not making excuses for them, but that could be some of the impetus behind playing on images that might be considered shocking.

Tanya Domi: Well, that's true. And let's give it to Nike, okay? Here, Nike played off of the situation involving the NFL players who chose to kneel as a protest to police brutality, and Nike doubled down on a really sensitive topic and said, "Okay, we're going to put out a shirt line that says 'Equality.'" I can't find the shirt. It's sold out. It's back-ordered. You can't get it. It's black with white letters with the swoosh, and you can't buy it. Their stock has gone through the ceiling. It's at elevations that are unbelievable.

So there's an example of really doing something that was socially conscious, and everybody thought, "Oh, that's not a good move." And that shows you what people want, what they care about too, doesn't it?

Elizabeth Wissi: Yes, and it points to some of the growing pains that the fashion industry seems to be going through right now. If you think through the changes in technology that have affected the fashion industry in the last couple of decades with fashion blogs and social media, Instagram, Instaglam, there's been a democratization of who it is who's considered a fashion authority, who dictates what is in fashion and what's considered attractive and fashionable.

And this kind of mismatch between what haute couture high-fashion houses like Prada are saying is in or should be desirable versus something that Nike ... I mean, now with athleisure and other movements within fashion to make more casual wear fashionable, I wouldn't argue that Nike is an haute couture fashion house, but Nike is not not fashionable.

Tanya Domi: No, it's not.

Elizabeth Wissi: You can wear Nike and be super fashion-y. But the way that there is this kind of mismatch and misstep or not really having a finger on the pulse when haute couture houses are supposed to have their finger on the pulse can be traced back, I would argue, to some of the changes that have had to happen with

regard to fashion print media losing its dominance in the face of social media and internet inroads into who dictates what's in fashion.

And also, fashion's really been reeling. The industry's been reeling ... not reeling, but the industry has been trying to catch up with the changes in what's considered beautiful or fashionable that really came from that moment in which, before social media was a force, fashion blogging made a space for totally different types of images to be fashionable that were not considered fashionable traditionally by Vogue and the dictators.

Tanya Domi: Can you give an example that you think is ...

Elizabeth Wissi: So like size acceptance. There were these fashion bloggers who couldn't find clothing that fit them in regular stores, and they didn't find images of themselves, some of whom were of color and some of whom were not. But they were women who were of a certain size who started presenting themselves in their fashion blogs as fashionable and giving tips about how to dress fashionably and made a space for themselves to be in fashion in a way that the regular fashion industry was not giving them space to be.

So now there are stores where you can ... I was just talking to somebody recently who's a larger size person who loves clothes, loves fashion, and went to a store in Soho called Universal ... something Universal, which caters to all sizes and goes all the way up to like 14. It wasn't a plus-size store. She was so excited to have been able to go to a store in Soho and try on cute clothes that all fit her, that were fashionable, that were available to her to buy, which was not the case before these ... they didn't do it single-handedly, but these "plus-size," these size-diverse women and men who were pushing for this inclusion. They're starting to be heard in the fashion industry.

With race, it's a little clunkier in coming. These are the growing pains. The outcry that happened when Prada had those bags and objects in their windows was partly on Twitter, on Instagram, in the media, on the internet, so it happened overnight.

Tanya Domi: It moves very fast.

Elizabeth Wissi: It moves so quickly in a way that it wouldn't have.

Tanya Domi: It was very fast.

Elizabeth Wissi: So the need to react is much stronger, the feeling of the need to react and issue an apology comes very strongly in the age of technological communication and development that we're in right now.

Tanya Domi: Absolutely, and the fashion industry isn't any different from any other industry in that way. But feeling it, experiencing it is never pleasant.

Elizabeth Wissi: No.

Tanya Domi: But they did react pretty quickly. The problem is, when publicity staff make the decision that they think they can wait something out, you just can't now in this environment. And also, let's just talk about, because I do teach on human rights myself, and in the entire industries, many industries, especially the clothing industries, athletic clothes, for example, they all started hiring what you would call human rights advisors and people who were advising them on human rights issues because mostly athletic clothes, where the clothes are made in Southeast Asia and other places, and it became a labor rights issue.

Then it expands beyond that, so now in business schools, for example Yale Business School has a whole track. A whole orientation of the Yale Business School's about social responsibility. Not so much at Columbia. It's there, but at Yale they market themselves differently to students, and social responsibility has become a major thing because of labor rights and these clothing companies. It's very interesting.

Elizabeth Wissi: That's actually a theme that came up when we were talking about planning the fashion studies masters here, that we would be billing the fashion studies masters as a socially conscious fashion studies masters and teaching that history and those labor issues and human rights and the law and intellectual property, along all of those lines. So we would be filling a niche or filling a gap in what's available to students out there by hopefully getting this masters program organized.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, and I think in New York it's been less ... they've been less, I think ... higher education has been less conscious of that aspect of it. I'm talking ... now, I teach at Columbia. I know about the business school there. Lots of people that teach there work on Wall Street. It makes sense. A lot of people who are adjuncts, they come from the Street, and so I don't think they're thinking about socially responsible practice by companies when they're on the floor of the stock exchange, for example.

So, if your masters program is doing that, that's great.

Elizabeth Wissi: We hope that it will be once it gets put in place.

Tanya Domi: So one of the things that we discussed is how the fashion industry is working to catch up with other fields. You're talking about the Prada incident shows you how it's working to catch up on publicity and reacting. What are some of the other areas that you think that they're working hard to catch up? You did reference some of the history of fashion that comes out of the very early beginnings of this country. You mentioned that. What are some of the other areas that you think would in fact be a challenge?

Elizabeth Wissi: One of the big issues that has gotten a lot of attention in recent years is the idea of cultural appropriation and when is it appropriate to say use a motif from a Native American headdress or costume in a fashion show or to appropriate? There's been a lot of discussion of appropriation of black culture and thinking about ... For instance, we were talking earlier about Dapper Dan.

Tanya Domi: Yes.

Elizabeth Wissi: And he is a person who was making homage garments in the '70s and early '80s. They looked similar to and they use a lot of the similar iconography and logo and design of Fendi and Gucci and high-end haute couture labels, but he was making the clothes in Harlem in his shop, and people in the know were able to go to Dapper Dan and get these amazing furs and leather coats. They echoed the designers that they were based on, but they were his own creations, and Fendi took him to court, suing him for copyright infringement. And he had to close his shop, and it was this moment where this ... he was appropriating in a way that was deemed illegal.

Yet, when we see a fashion show, and there's a direct copy of a designer of color or of a cultural moment in black culture, people complain, but nobody's taking anyone to court. And that is still going on.

Tanya Domi: So there's a double standard.

Elizabeth Wissi: There's a double standard, but what's interesting with Dapper Dan is that, because of this way that fashion's had to react and kind of admit that it has been involved in these appropriations and actually has been involved in crushing appropriation of their imagery, in a happy end to a story that was rather sad, Dapper Dan has now been tapped to work for Gucci, and he has a line with Gucci where he is designing clothing that's Dapper Dan Gucci clothing. So he's been able to get back in business, do his designing, but do it alongside of and with and get the profit for his work.

And he also represents a broader trend, which I see happening in parts of haute couture, not Prada, but there seems to be, and I hope it doesn't go away, but there seems to be a trendiness to being of color or black, where it's ... like Balenciaga had this sort of ... if we think about hip hop being appropriated by high fashion and street fashion coming from areas that are associated with people of color or historically black neighborhoods, it's a longer history. But if we think very recently of some of the haute couture campaigns, which are not depicting the blue-eyed, blonde, skinny, rich woman. They're depicting people who are of color, who look "street," and they are lending that cool to the brand, but it's more of a collaboration now than it used to be. It's not the appropriation and taking away and not giving credit. It's a working together.

Tanya Domi: Well, you're reminding me of something where I have watched some films on ... I mean, it's not movie films but videos talking about how hip hop introduced a

whole fashion line and that many of the artists have created their own lines of clothing. It's a real thing. And, of course, New York is part of that scene. I'm certainly not an authority on any of this, but it's very interesting to see like Jay-Z and some of these other really big names that have created clothing lines. You see it. You see kids on the trains because I go through Harlem on the way home, and you see everybody wearing what's really hip hop clothing. It's hot.

Elizabeth Wissi: It's hot.

Tanya Domi: California, New York, it's a hot scene. It's fashion.

Elizabeth Wissi: It is fashion. And I think that it couldn't have happened as fashion in say the '70s. I think that part of that story is this democratization of fashion that the internet and social media has wrought, to some people's chagrin, but most people, I think, are glad that this has happened because that whole lockstep dictate of what is in this season, you must wear this particular thing, was really a rule by iron fist, which wasn't productive for many creative people getting credit for that work.

Tanya Domi: When I was in high school, you could only wear certain things to school. There was a certain way that you were supposed to look. It was so routinized. It was just unbelievable how it was. Of course, I grew up in the Midwest, but another place that I feel is pretty routinized that's sort of reflective of places I've lived was Washington D.C., where they're sort of uniform. It's really conservative there. And that still exists to a certain extent.

And then you're in a place like New York, and it's everything and anything and the same thing about L.A. or some of the more other liberal places to live in the country. There's a culture that yields to that. It's just so different from when I grew up, how fashion has really opened up and what's appropriate and what's not.

Elizabeth Wissi: Well, and what's really fascinating is to think about the future of fashion because you talked about human rights and abuses of human labor to produce clothing, which is an ongoing issue and also the ravages of environmental destruction that's been wrought by the fashion industry and trying to move toward more sustainable types of clothing and producing clothing in a way that doesn't damage other human beings or the environment.

There's a very ... it's not here yet, but on the front lines of some of the fashion studies research that's going on out there, there are discussions of new types of materials that would be produced biologically, where say algae would grow the fibers of the clothing or the dye would come from algae or mushrooms or other materials that are kind to the environment. I've been in some professional settings where I've been doing research, pursuing this idea of bio-design, where biology is an integral part of the design and in fact living biological organisms actively being.

Tanya Domi: Wow, wow.

Elizabeth Wissi: Their biological little selves are part of what make the garment or the object function. Some of those ... there's a lot of hype around this idea that we won't have to exploit human beings because the little cells will do the work for us.

Tanya Domi: So you can grow it.

Elizabeth Wissi: You can grow it, and that's also ... think of haute couture, the made-to-order clothing, if you could grow your dress or your shirt or whatever it is, and it could be formed to your exact dimensions, and then you wear it and dissolve it in the sink with a solvent that comes with the dress. We don't have any waste.

So there's some really interesting things happening with material science and material design and bio-design, which I think, if they can come to be in a way that they're saying they will, they may represent some solutions. They're not going to help us deal with racist missteps on the part of haute couture fashion houses, but they may help with some of the other issues that we were discussing today.

Tanya Domi: That sounds very Star Trek-y. I'm just going to ask you one more question before we close here. Speaking of racism, in the entertainment field, in Hollywood, and in media, we have had an explosion around Me Too, explosion, a seismic resetting, where there was big consequences for very wealthy men. One of the consequences was just announced yesterday. The new news president of CBS Television is a woman for the first time in history at CBS.

Has the fashion industry had a Me Too moment yet that's rocked it like what has happened in media and in entertainment?

Elizabeth Wissi: Well, most certainly in fashion photography, there has been a Me Too moment, and what's interesting there is that not only are women coming forward in the Me Too, stating what's happened to them and calling out people who've done damaging things to them in their professional interactions, there also have been men who have been coming forward in a way.

Tanya Domi: Yes, gay men, right?

Elizabeth Wissi: Yeah, not even gay men, but perhaps, like with Bruce Weber, he's a photographer who likes men.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Elizabeth Wissi: Or at least he did things in his professional practice that made the men he was photographing feel uncomfortable enough to come forward. So, in fashion photography, there definitely has been some toppling down of icons who were ruling the roost, who are now ... No one will hire them.

Tanya Domi: You had to be shot by them in order to be.

Elizabeth Wissi: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Right?

Elizabeth Wissi: Yeah, so they were like gatekeepers, and they have been called on their practices that weren't acceptable. So that has happened. With the major fashion houses, not so much right now.

Tanya Domi: Not so much, huh?

Elizabeth Wissi: And it may be partly because fashion always was considered a domain that was more feminine or acceptable to be a woman of power in and a gay man of power in.

Tanya Domi: Like Wintour you mean?

Elizabeth Wissi: Well, in the print magazines, but also in the design houses.

Tanya Domi: Sure.

Elizabeth Wissi: That white heterosexual patriarchal male way of being in the world in terms of domineering people and kind of making them bow to your will maybe was less part of the DNA of the culture of fashion. I'm just speculating here that that could be why. But it may still be coming.

Tanya Domi: Interesting. Well, it really did rifle through the entertainment world and the media world. Fox Television, CBS, I mean it was like one domino after another.

Anyway, it's been wonderful to have you. I'd like to have you come back after maybe the masters program really gets going. It's exciting to work with people like you at the Graduate Center. Very pleased you could come on.

Elizabeth Wissi: Thank you for having me. It was a great pleasure to speak with you today.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to today's guest, Professor Elizabeth Wissing of the Borough of Manhattan Community College and the Graduate Center CUNY.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.