Karen Anderson

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More Than A Color: the Marginalization of African American Beauty

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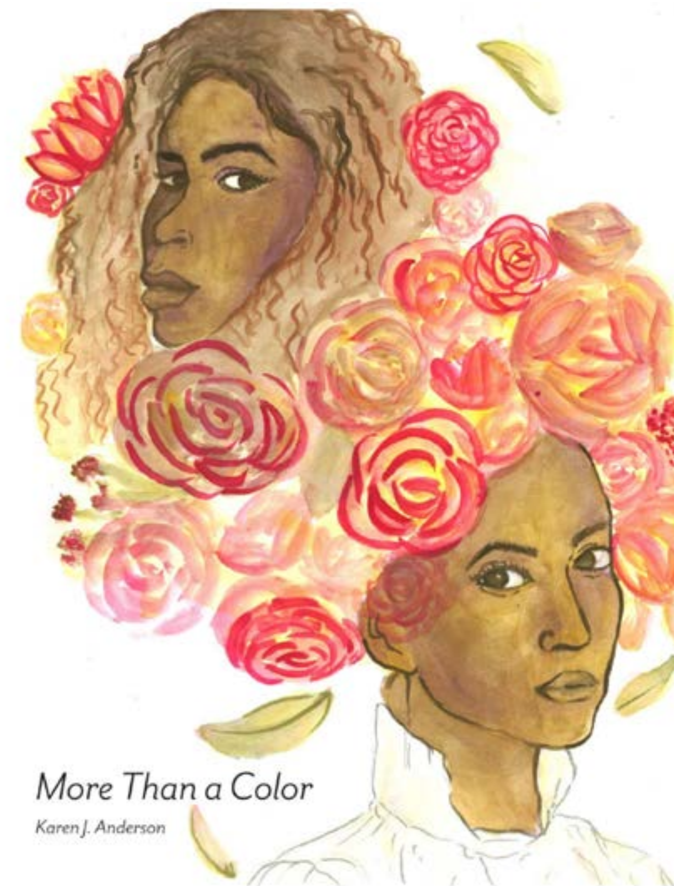


Thesis

Beyoncé Knowles Carter had editorial power over the cover and content of her own story on a major mainstream magazine. Serena Williams did the same on the cover and content of another one. The names of the magazines are not important because they didn't even respond to my inquiry. Brown became beautiful in 2018 when major fashion magazines showcased it on their covers. Where were brown skinned people on the beauty spectrum before then? I mean I had heard the statement "Black is Beautiful" but was it really? This sent me on a journey which led to libraries and internet searches, but also contacting industry professionals to talk about their experiences with this. For this project I interviewed four men to talk about the beauty found in African American women along with researching different moments in history that stood out as defining. All four men worked in the fashion and design industry on projects that featured beautiful women by their industry standards. Three, I chatted with on the phone and transcribed the conversations, while with the fourth I exchanged emails. I learned that men are very

dominant in this field and the way they see beauty determines how we see beauty.

Introduction

When I was about 7-years-old and my sister was 5, I remember leading her down our dirt streets to the pave cement of Rosedale Fort Worth, Texas during the mid-1970s, which seemed to me like a big highway. We would watch for oncoming cars and when it was clear would run across as fast as we could. Then we went down the hill past old shack houses, empty rundown buildings and Reverend Ranger's large church building. Then we went up another hill pass more rundown houses to Miss Ofelia's beauty shop, which was an old smoke-filled shack cluttered with all kinds of things.

Miss Ofelia, a thin little black woman, had one chair in the room, but you couldn't see anything from the smoke of the cigarette hanging from her lip and smoke coming from the hot comb in her hand. Sometimes there would be other ladies there so we would play outside until she was ready to do our hair. Sometimes we would have to sit in there and talk to her which was almost as painful as getting our hair done.

Most of the time all she had to do was press it, because Mom would wash our hair and send us to get a good firm pressing for Easter or Christmas or some occasion. Live flames would heat the comb that would straighten young heads with a sizzle with an occasional ear or neck getting burned.

"Are you tender headed?" Miss Ofelia would ask my sister.

Her painfilled face was a yes as the older woman pulled the hot comb sizzling and crackling through my sister's hair.

So we learned very young that beauty was associated with pain. This story will examine the beauty and pain surrounding African American images in the media.

Many young African American girls learned this process in the name of beauty, respectability and uplifting the race. Over and over history tells the story of African Americans believing that how they look to others will determine how they are treated. And to some extent it is true.

Traditionally, beauty is the qualities of something, shape, color or form that pleases the senses, especially sight. Africans brought to the new world had to define and redefine their view of what was beautiful because of the restrictions they constantly had to endure. They couldn't wear the clothes that were beautiful, they couldn't wear their hair in a beautiful manner, they couldn't even clean themselves. So this idea was something that developed over time using what was available.

Blain Roberts wrote that blackness was more than just the opposite of whiteness. It represented the negative qualities associated with civilization, morality, and beauty. (page 3-4, Pageants, Parlors and Pretty Women, Blain Roberts) African slaves were behind the eight ball, so to speak, as they were the opposite of beautiful.

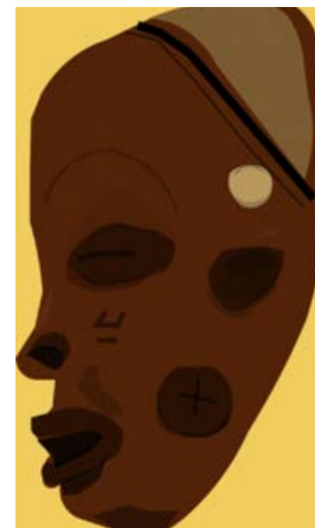
This theory persisted for centuries. In Margo Jefferson's ***Negroland***, she describes a standard for beauty for African Americans in the 1950s that was quantifiable. Even though women could not control things like their skin color or the grade of their hair, how you looked determined everything about your life. If a woman had a skin tone between beige and honey with "decent to good hair" they would find themselves attractive. "Dark skin often suggests aggressive, indiscriminate sexual readiness. At the very least it calls attention to your race and can incite demeaning associations."[1]

Jefferson goes on to explain that nappy hair, curly kinky hair that is tightly coiled, required heavy cream and a hot comb to manage. Because of this strenuous process the hair seldom grew passed the neck or shoulders.

This hot comb and skin lightning cream helped African American women take on some of the aesthetics of Anglo women. Was this enough to help others see the beauty in them and appreciate what they really brought to the table?

Let's look at three images that I believe are iconic not only because of the women, but the story the photos tell.

1 Margo Jefferson, Negroland, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2015), 53.



It Is Art

In the first work of art, a honey brown skinned young woman sits on an invisible throne crowned with a lovely array of flowers that has started to fade. The full blooms are reds, pinks, yellows and off whites. Her headdress conceals her hair but connects her with everything that is real and shiny and fake all at the same time.

Her body angle is away from the viewer, but a tiny turn of her head gives the viewer enough to know she sees them.

Her thick arched brows betray her hair color while her pointed nose flairs out on the ends signaling her heritage. Her eyes catch you out of the corner letting you know whatever she has to say you better listen. The story in those brown pools are serious and her lips are ready to command.

Her natural looking face is facing the light

She looks confident, self-assured and serious. The high white cotton collar almost cloaks her

neck, while the lace of the dress fades in with the light. Her image casts a shadow on the white behind her.

This is no tragic mulatto with a whore in need of redemption vibe. She sits like a woman of authority poised to give orders and take what is rightfully hers.

Like her ancestors, she tells the world she is worthy of everything she wants and our attention. In the second image, her coco brown skinned cousin stands facing a gold wall with her arms by her side draped in a shiny gold fabric that catches the light like her skin. Kinky waves of hair flow down her back but encircle her face like a well-groomed lion's mane.
The dark roots of her hair freely fan out to bronzish brown getting lighter the farther away it moves.

Full dark eyebrows arch over the full features of her face. Her eyes stare out of the corner directly at the viewer with her muted color lips about to speak. The look comes over her shoulder as an afterthought, but with a firm glance so they know she means it.

The tense muscles in her arm relax at her side, while the gold robe reveals her legs and left butt cheek. Her stance is firm and intentional.
Now the viewer sees the smile that says kiss my fine ass as she stands confidently.

She is not a mammy or someone to serve up whatever concoction that is needed for the moment. She is royalty and has placed past behind her and she is going forward, showing resilience in her tough times

In the final image, a sophisticated darker skinned woman with kinky hair.

The third and final image, a black and white image is of dark-skinned woman staring directly at the viewer. Her natural kinky hair is gathered to a large evenly shaped Afro puff on top of her head like a crown, with a glimpse of light coming from behind her. Her forehead is clean and clear with the lines of both brows angled toward her full nose. The eyeliner draws a contrast to the whites of her eyes, but also allows her lips to remain neutral. Her eyes say see me for who I am.

Her face ignores the well-groomed hand that balances a cigarette in a holder with 1960s sophistication in front of it. She is draped in a white piece that has small triangles in a pattern all over it.

These three images reveal strong beautiful women of color telling a story that had needed to be told for centuries.

Why do images like these need to be made and why?
What value can images of African American women bring to the world?
What is the impact of not having images like this?
Who creates images like this and why would they?
Can an ordinary photoshoot changes the way the world sees something?

Our Crown

He thought it would be lucky if his work got into the magazine at all, but he was determined not to compromise himself. He wanted to prove himself as a maker, artist and designer.

This type of design work started off as a way to make money, but Phil John Perry soon found a new way of creative expression. He worked day jobs to help finance his art, so that he didn't compromise his artwork.

Born in Manchester England the 32-year old designer found the work was useful to the companies he worked for because they got normal floral and event expertise, and someone who could deliver a concept and create in a different way.

"The inclusion of my own true creative thoughts into the world of flowers made it one of my ways to personally express myself."

He submitted ideas to a magazine and was happy when he got the call to create a floral design for a photoshoot.

His assistant Jemeka and he arrived at 5am to the flower market, then the countryside shoot and began working.
"It was baking hot which is very unlike Britain and very hard with fresh florals."

He said the team from Vogue was overwhelmingly kind and thoughtful, the stylists' were professional and personable. The morning was spent getting everything ready, it was busy and stressful.

He said they struggled initially with the structure of the headdress and making it stable on her head.
"I like a touch of anarchy, irreverence and mischief in my design."

The team liked it too. Perry said the team asked him to create a second floral headdress, which he did on the fly.
The best of his day was when he met Beyoncé in the second headdress.

"I never thought I'd actually see Beyoncé but was lucky enough to meet her and see her in my work that was the best part of the day by far. Especially when she said "Phil it's beautiful"'

"I have no idea how far the image would go or know that it would make the cover and the image end up in a fine art museum. For a true representation of my work to be linked with such an icon is an achievement that I didn't see coming."

Historically, Neither did some other people.

The newly freed African women made beautiful dresses from the finest fabrics in celebration of their new positions. Not only were they released from bondage of slavery, but they had business that afforded them the luxury of wearing jewels in their hair.

These women from the Senegal and Gambia regions of Africa used the French legal system in the French colonies which allowed enslaved Africans to get a fair market value for themselves, and with funds they earned from their labor, purchase their freedom.

The system was designed for older slaves to buy their freedom when they were not worth much to their masters anymore, but more younger women used the process. Not only did they free themselves, but they freed other women.

This new skilled labor opened businesses that gave them this newfound wealth. But Caucasian women became wary of these independent women with funds for fear they would take their husbands. So the Caucasians contacted their legislature.

After being petitioned by the local women, French American Governor Don Miro created the Tignon Law in 1786 that handle the situation. The law required all Africans to dress like a slave class of people which meant no wearing fancy dresses or jewelry on the streets. They would also have to wrap their hair in a handkerchief.

Angry, the former slaves tied their hair up with some of the most elaborate beautiful scarves and cloths they could find creating their own version of anarchy.
Even in the British colonies there were laws that had requirements about how African slaves

dress. But more interesting, were the laws that restricted the purchase of slaves from French America or the Islands. It was quite revealing was that it was illegal to bring in slaves who once lived in French America or where owned by French Americans. The colonies did not want the intelligent thinking Slaves walking along their roads.

The South Carolina colony created laws to keep the slave population in line such as all slaves had to have the proper attire. The Negro Act of 1735 required slaves wear clothing made from the cheapest fabrics with designated colors such as checked patterns or blue, coarse cloth. If the sheriff or any of his patrol caught slaves in any other type of clothing, like hand me downs from the master, they could be taken from them.

I find it ironic that the people who had to wash, sew and make the clothes for the masters, were charged to wear something less. The hands that created the beauty that adorned the master's body were made by people from whom it was legally restricted. And through the process of creating things for others, they established themselves as true artists.

Nothing elaborate, yet.

Our Other Crown: The Hair

"It's about accepting yourself for who you are and working with, not against what you were born with" British celebrity hairdresser Vernon François.

"So often women, men and kids will tell me about how a negative relationship with their hair has been transformed by something they've seen, heard or read relating to my work."

François believes beauty comes from within.

François says helping others to understand and embrace their hair's true texture it is what motivates him to keep pushing boundaries; with new hairstyles, product innovations and most importantly, education.

The North England native started braiding hair when he was young because he grew tired of his mother doing his hair. Once he learned the process, he braided everything he got his hands on, according to The Dispatch Weekly.

At the age of 14, François took a job at a salon and by 17 won his first industry award. As he built his career and brand, he styled celebrities like Lupita Nyong'o, Tracee Ellis Ross and Kerry Washington.

His work has been featured in Vogue, Vanity Fair and Harper's Bazaar. More importantly, he has created shampoo, conditioners, and finishing products for all types of textured hair. Like others who have spent time learning about hair, he has created learning tools to help everyone on their hair journey.

"It's linked with confidence, self-expression and individuality. Your hair's true texture is as unique as you are and one of many magical ways of expressing parts of your identity."

He has styled all types of hair for celebrities and non-celebrities. When things don't go as he plans them, he adapts.

"That's an important point for anyone whose styling either their own or someone else's hair; remember, don't be too rigid in your approach. Hair behaves differently on different days, because of things like when it was washed, the style it was most recently worn in and what kind of

products have been used in it."

"Put on some music, do your hair when you're in a good mood, and if something's not working, change it. Don't be afraid to try something new."

This is a practice he uses in his own life, which is filled with all kinds of moments, big and small. He was the hair stylist on a project that created beautiful photographs.
"This shoot was different because (Serena) made a bold statement that was very personal to her." He wrote, "she was putting her most authentic self in the spotlight via the written word as well as visually."

It was his job to make sure that the visual met the boldness of the words.
"I was excited that she was doing an unretouched feature." He had worked with Serena before, but this shoot was different because she made a bold statement that was very personal to her. The best part of the day for him was seeing the finished result, all parts of her look complementing each other perfectly, he said.

"Serena looked stunning."

"I hope that people will remember the images as being iconic, strong and inspiring."

François says he is driven to make a positive difference.

When the Civil War ended African Americans were set on a journey to heal and learn to see good and beauty in themselves. They would learn what they could accomplish, but the heart to uplift others would be the key.

At end of the Nineteenth Century, African American women like Sarah Breedlove had a difficult time managing their hair. She found that she like many women in her position, had a scalp disease and her hair was falling out leaving patches of bald spots. They had a poor diet which lacked protein, and limited ability to wash their hair often. With no running water in their homes, they had to carry water from a well or creek which made regular care impossible. They may have washed their bodies once a week, and their hair once a month if that often.

If these women saw images of women in newspapers or books, the women were probably white with flowing straight hair, something they could not have. Being considered beautiful was probably a dream because Caucasian society told them often they were ugly because of the color of their skin.

There were not many images of African Americans with great hairstyles to set an example. One of the most prominent images of an African American woman in the late 19th Century was that of Aunt Jemima. A caricature of a slave mammy, Aunt Jemima was a character in a minstrel show.

Nancy Green, a former slave, was hired by two Caucasian men to play the character in state and county fairs to sell their pancake flour. Green who was born in 1834 in Kentucky, served pancakes to thousands of people until her death in 1923.

She is the face of the African American woman that mainstream America became familiar with.

Her hair was wrapped with an old kerchief and none of the adornments of modern beauty. But her job was not to be beautiful, it was to sell pancake flour. She did such a good job selling this product at county fairs that they signed her to a lifetime contract.

After a couple of failed marriages and working as a laundry woman, Breedlove developed a business from her own problems as she started the adventure in hair. She went to work for an African American woman who sold hair care products to other African Americans and found some success with the products.

I am sure Breedlove found that African Americans had a wide variety of hair textures and the products did not do the same thing to all types of hair. Yet the products and system did enough to stop the damage and grow her hair. She thought it could do more.

By this time, Breedlove had married Charles Joseph Walker, an African American man who worked in advertising, and continued to experiment with the products to see if she could make them better. She experienced firsthand what it did for women to take care of their hair and how it gave them confidence.

She created a new product under her name, Madam CJ Walker, traveled the country and taught women how to take care of their hair. The budding entrepreneur enabled these women to start their own businesses that catered to African American women.

Her products were sold door to door by women who were trained by her company. She had a workforce that distributed and sold her products.

Madam CJ Walker became not only a millionaire but also a philanthropist because her goals were to uplift the race. There were other companies trying to sell products to African American women, but usually the companies owned by Caucasian people used products like alcohol that were harmful to African American hair. Soon women would look at a product and ask who the product was made by to determine if it was harmful or not. This is a practice that still continues today when it comes to products for people of color and ensuring that those products have the best in mind for the intended purchaser.

Even though Walker was a philanthropist contributing to things causes like the NAACP, her image was not popular in mainstream America, even though a photo of an African American was on the product.

The African American image that was popular in mainstream America was the Mammy, which Aunt Jemima personified. Even though Walker was making millions helping African Americans grow confident in their appearances, the image of the kerchief headed mammy still dominated.

In 1939, the first African American woman to win an Academy Award was Hattie McDaniel for the role of Mammy in *Gone With The Wind*. She represented her people well despite being cast for the rest of her career as maids and servants. She lived an amazing life, integrating neighborhoods and supporting the NAACP. But Hollywood wanted little colored girls to know they could be maids; they could not be Vivien Leigh.

Pushing the Limits

Hattie McDaniel said she would rather play a maid than be one. She created a beautiful example of how to work with the limits given her. As she played servants, no one hought she was beautiful enough to put her on the cover of a magazine. Historically African American female faces were not represented in movies, magazines or anywhere else as attractive.

Portrayed in the media as something to be loathed, African Americans had an uphill battle when it came to being seen as beautiful or even bringing something good to a situation. The racial climate in the United States did not help.

Until 1915 most motion pictures were two to three-reelers lasting about 10 minutes. With Birth of a Nation by D.W. Griffith, the experience was a three-hour film filled with hatred and fe*ar toward Africa*ns. This created an environment that fostered Jim Crow Laws and segregation which was designed to keep African Americans in sub servant positions.

These limits were not just in the 1920s and 30s. It was not just in movies, but in magazines, newspapers and advertising. It lasted for decades.

It was difficult for African American women to get work outside of domestic skillsets. McDaniel knew this and took the acting roles that were offered her. Other actresses chose to push the limit, and some found success, while others did not.

Beautiful and talented dancers and singers with light brown skin and some European features did not fit the role of the mammy. Women like Josephine Baker, Nina Mae McKinney and Dorothy Dandridge did not want to play servants but wanted roles that showcased their talent. They wanted to be stars like their Caucasian counterparts, but they would be cornered by another racial stereotype.

Donald Bogle referred to this type as the tragic mulatto. This person was usually female and the product of a Caucasian father and African American mother. This woman is usually doomed in life because they have a drop of African American blood.[2]

2 Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks, (New York: Continuum, 1994) 144.

A mixture of African and European America heritage, Josephine Baker had some success on Broadway as a dancer and performing in clubs around the city. Born in St. Louis Missouri in 1906, Baker grew up poor and hard but moved to New York City in her late teens in 1915. She performed in clubs around the city and made it into several Broadway shows.

Mary McAuliffe wrote that all black musical Paris revue could not afford Ethel Waters who was an African American star at the time, so they hired a 19-year-old Baker, who moved to France. In France, Baker opened in La Revue Negre with the comedic dancing that garnered her fame in the US. She knew this was the opportunity to get all she wanted from show business. In the act finale, "She made her entry entirely nude except for a pink flamingo feather between her limbs; she was being carried upside down and doing the split on the shoulder of a black giant."[3]

Baker displayed that the tragic mulatto could be a person of joy who is comfortable in her skin. She took their stereotype and made her own rules. Later she became so successful that she became known for her performance almost in the nude with a banana girdle. In 1927 she became the first African American to star in an international motion picture, *La Sirene Des tropiques*, a role that would catapult her to stardom.

Yet the thing that sold her on Paris, was not the fame, but the chance to sit at tables and eat with white people.[4] The segregation that bound African Americans in the US was not visible in France.

Baker's honey brown skin and ample body proportions made her the target of racists in the United States. In an announcement of the 1936 Ziegfeld Follies with Josephine Baker *Time* magazine referred to her as a "Negro wench with underwhelming talent and performances who was slightly bucked tooth," according to Kimberly Brown. It also read she was a common woman who "was essentially lucky to earn attention in Paris."[5]

Racism blinded them to Baker's exquisiteness, but it freed her to become part of the French

3Mary McAuliffe, When Paris Sizzles, (Maryland: Rowman Littlefield, 2016) 175

4 Ibid, 175

5 Kimberly Brown, "In the Eye of the Beholders" In Soul Thieves, ed. Tamara L and Baruti N. Kopano, (New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 77

Resistance during World War II and becoming a civil right activist supporting the cause in the United States. Baker used her fame and power to bolster the things she believed in.

Not so successful was the African American woman who found fame in the US but was not able to leverage it for her causes or even her own life.

Dorothy Dandridge was also considered very successful for an African American actress, as the first African American on the cover of *Life*, a mainstream magazine, for the role of Carmen Jones, which she also received an Academy Award Best Actress Nomination.

Dandridge started in show business early because her mother, Ruby was an actress. Dorothy and her sister performed on the *Chitlin' Circuit*, a group of African American venues, until the depression got worst. She had nice small roles working with big movie stars like Bill Bojangles Robinson and the Marx Brothers.

Her major breakthrough role came in *Carmen Jones* (1954), written by Oscar Hammerstein taken from the opera *Carmen*. Dandridge was the lead in an all African American cast, directed by Otto Preminger, an Austrian, who would decide how African Americans would be portrayed. She would be a sexy factory worker who lures away the good guy, but deserts him for a prize fighter and unhappy ending.

She made several movies playing roles that were not servants. In one of her key roles, she played a young wife, and in another a teacher, but Carmen put her in front of the nation. Bogle said that even though she attempted to be contemporary and daring, she still played a doomed, unfulfilled woman.[6]

The audience could not see Dorothy Dandridge the way she wanted to be seen. She did not have control of her sexuality like Baker did. She was not telling her story and what she had been through. Bogle said she was not able to affect or touch the lives of the public and sweep the audience off its feet.

<u>That is the rub</u>. Dandridge's sexuality was portrayed through the eyes of a Caucasian male. It

6 Bogle, Toms, 149.

used sensuality to cheapen her beauty. It did not value her brownness, or the texture of her hair. These women were judged by standards of beauty that they could not meet.

"We love this girl but she's a little too dark for the story. Or we love this girl but she's too big or her hair is too frizzy or she's too freckly. It was always too something," said the photographer. "And all of these girls would get knocked off the list and I would be left with the bottom two girls, who would be the typical blonde-haired famous models."

A season photographer Alexi Lubomirski grew frustrated with the lack of diversity in his photo-shoots. He had established himself in the fashion industry shooting for publications like Harper's Bazaar, Vogue, and GQ around the world.

But he saw that he was shooting some of the same type of models over and over but knew that the world was much broader than that.

Lubomirski was born in England in 1975, his mother and stepfather moved to Botswana when was young. After finishing a degree in the UK, at the University of Brighton, he went to work for famous photographer Mario Testino as an assistant.

"In the late 90s, early 2000, beauty was all about what you saw on the fashion pages of Vogue. It was like a 6-foot Amazonian girl, not to ethnic, not to this, not to that, just safe in the middle," He said explaining how it was when he started.

"Now beauty to me has nothing to do with looks and it is to do about the way people hold themselves, it is about confidence, its about joy, its about taking ownership of everything, owning your look and just living it."

He has done some inspiring photo shoots for people like Scarlett Johansson, Jennifer Lopez, Selma Hayek and more recently wedding photographer Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. But there is also a fun side of him reflected in the tutorials on his website where he coaches new photographers in everything from how to plan a photoshoot to sending their portfolio out to get work. He tells stories allowing others to learn from his adventures.
Lubomirski learned that photographing an individual, famous or not requires a connection with

that person.
“Authenticity is beautiful. So, if you come into set, I want to find the real you. I want to talk to you and get to know you.”

He said he makes real connections because once he finds that point he can do his job. “Connection can be the fact that you have listen to them and they feel heard.”

He said he builds trust which helps a person give something of themselves to the process. But he also understood that he needed to become whatever his photo client needed.

“...if they need a best friend, I become a best friend, If they need to be the Queen of England, I become subservient.”

When he remembered photographing Serena Williams for Harper’s Bazaar in 2019, he said she arrived that morning and he allowed her to settle and get ready.

“It was about celebrating her beauty. It was an unretouched shoot. She’s a force.”

Serena wore gold, which was many of the things worked out before they got to this point. He said when celebrities do those kinds of shoots, they like to come in, work and go. Many of the decisions had been made before they got to that point.

So when the time came for the revealing images. The image where the dress would flow away from her body and reveal her toned legs leading up to her bare rear end.

”Now, when we shot it,” he said of the images of Serena revealing her rear end. “I am respectful. It is a very fine line between empowering somebody and objectifying somebody.”
He said there were frames before that and frames after where we showed too much or not enough.

“So I showed her every frame and she chose the one she was comfortable with.” The ones she chose were sent to the magazine.

Williams was a woman in charge of her body.

Lubomirski is the kind of artist that uses his platform for change, like his initiative to make fashion and entertainment industry more ethical, compassionate and moral by saying no to using fur, feathers, and exotic skins in their work. It is called Creatives4Change.

Lubomirski believes in using what he has to change the world around him to make it a better place, and a few minutes chatting with him reveals that. Another one of his projects was the Diverse Beauty book.

He understands the impact of imagery in the mainstream and wanted his project to reflect that any young girl can feel a part of the gang. He wanted any type of girl to be able to see her type in a high fashion image, so he found women of all shapes and sizes to feature in his book.
He even interviewed a diversity professor who suggested each model give five words that describe themselves.

“You will see on each page how everybody defines themselves in five words.”

Lubomirski felt that just because you see a model one way, doesn’t mean that is the way they see themselves. It was important to understand how the person saw themselves.

“My idea was twofold, one was that I realized that if you were an alien and you came down and looked at fashion magazines to try and find out what beauty was, you would think that beauty ranged from one to five. But if you actually go out on the street and you look out at the world, you will realize that beauty ranges from one to thousand and that what was not being represented in magazines.”

Black Is Beautiful

Tanisha Ford points out that everyday women began wearing wigs, not to be white, but to be seen as sophisticated and on trend in her book, *Liberated Threads*. Most of the trends for beauty and fashion were set by Caucasian people, which meant most of the African American models in both industries were fair skinned and straight hair, like Dorothy Dandridge. The industries seem to become racially tolerant of those who could look a tinted shade of white.

This happened around the same time as white companies began to realize that there was some money to be made in the African American community wrote Tanisha Ford, an associate professor of history at the Graduate Center, CUNY. The companies would advertise in the African American newspapers, using images that had thin white features, with the skin darkened to represent African Americans.[7]

It was on the way to being the norm for beauty in the African American community.
But they weren't the only ones to notice a need in the African American community. *Ebony Fashion Fair*, started by Eunice Johnson of Johnson Publishing Company began doing fashion events with models who had fair skin and straight hair in 1958 in Chicago. It traveled to several cities annually and provided exclusive clothing.

In New York City, every August, Mr. Carlos Cook with the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement would celebrate Marcus Garvey's birthday with a festival. Garvey was a central figure in New York City in the 1910s and 20s starting an organization for the improvement of African Americans that united them with their African ancestry.

Cook continued to promote the philosophy of Marcus Garvey who always emphasized the beauty of black people their hair, their complexion, as well as their history.

Cook started a beauty contest in 1959 that he called the Miss Natural Standard of Beauty show and began to do it annually. It was a pageant to showcase African American women with their hair in its natural state. The winner of this contest would receive a prize sometimes up to $100.[8]

7 Tanisha Ford, Liberated Threads, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) 44

8 Ford, Liberated Threads, 51.

When the **African Jazz-Art Society** went to see Mr. Cook's show Miss Natural Standard of Beauty, it gave them an idea.

AJAS was formed in 1956 **by Elombe Brath, Kwame Brathwaite, Frank Adu, Ernest Baxter, Chris Hall, David Ward, Jimmy Abu** and **Robert Gumbs** as a collective of artists and creatives around jazz and uplifting the race. They produced jazz concerts, art exhibitions and cultural events.[9] These men formed a group that would change the way the community thought about being beautiful.

"The president of AJASS one day after going to one of these beauty contests called me and said. 'Robert I've got an idea. We should produce a series of fashion shows with women wearing their hair in its natural state. I said, Wow that is a great idea."

Robert Gumbs said because at that time there were very few women wearing their hair not pressed. The New York City native, was born in Harlem in 1939, but raised in the Bronx and went to school with other members of the group.

One of the few remaining members of the society, Gumbs remembered the first show, which was January 28, 1962 at a small club in Harlem.

"Originally we had planned to just do one show," said Gumbs.

The AJAS held a hair fashion show promoting African American women wearing their hair in its natural state and promoting fashion representing African ideas. During a time when protests were hot, these men decided on another way to get their message of black pride across.[10]

Gumbs said they were fortunate that singer actress Abby Lincoln was interested in their project and participated. Lincoln, who was married to Max Roach, the famous drummer, held a promising career ahead of her as an actress. She would go on to co star with Ivan Dixon in *Nothing But A Man* (1964) and later Sidney Poitier in *For Love of Ivy* (1968)

Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln release the album We Insist for the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation and the new African Independence Movement. Harlem was a perfect place for it.

9 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grandassa_Models, accessed May , 2020.

10 Ford, Liberated Threads, 52

"She was part of the first show."

AJAS started the first show with 8 women who were not trained as models, but they had Abbey who as a celebrity. They also had Frank Abu who was a choreographer.

Gumbs said Lincoln began wearing her hair in its natural state.

"To our amazement and surprise, outside of the club there were lines of people."

"We said wow, This is something. We had no idea. We were touching a nerve among black women at that time who were looking to change in how they were perceived."

AJAS had planned one show, but there were so many people they had to do a second show.

"And from then on, the momentum built," Gumbs said.

"Women came to the shows, they saw how professionally it was done. Keep in mind they were not professionals these were everyday women who decided they wanted a new look and identity."

The idea took off, so the men created a modeling group.

Grandassa Models

Gumbs said they named the modeling group the Grandassa Models because it was a term that was used by Mr. Cook to define the "lush beauty of African landscape."[11]

AJAS began by asking the winners of Mr. Cook's contest the Miss Natural Standard of Beauty contests to be models. But some women who attended the shows would join and start modeling. When the shows started, they featured hair, but soon local fashion designers wanted to participate also.

"It became not just a hair show, but a hair and fashion show. It really began to take off."

The show was also produced in Detroit and Chicago in 1963. Gumbs said it was the beginning of the whole Black Arts Movement.

"When you came to the show you thought you were attending an Ebony Fashion Fair."

11 Ford, Liberated Threads, 52

Original models were Clara Lewis, Black Rose, Nomsa Brath, Priscilla Bardonille, Mari Toussaint, Esther Davenport, Wanda Sims, and Beatrice Cramston.[12]
Gumbs said these women were pioneers who had inner strength and commitment. He said the women would walk down the street and be ridiculed by strangers. These women had to face pressure from their family and friends, but also could lose their jobs for wearing their hair in a manner that was not acceptable to the current standard.

"When you came to a Naturally show what you saw where women who were predominately of a darker complexion, natural hair and full features. That was counter to what was existing in the fashion world at that time."

Historically
The concept of brown skinned people being beautiful or even pleasing to look at was something difficult for European artists. Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby examined work by Edouard Manet

12 We started the Trend, https://hellobeautiful.com/3052073/grandassa-models-and-rihanna/, Accessed May 4, 2020.

that included a woman of African descent in his work, Olympia's Maid (1863). Manet's prejudice affected his work leaving the image of the dark maid less defined and put together as Olympia, the Caucasian focus of the painting. Grigsby pointed out that the history of artists in France at the time referred to Africans as ugly and unfit for paintings.[13]

Trapped with the predominant image of people of color being those of unkempt slaves, African Americans had to create their own standards of beauty and acceptability. Several women did the same as Madam CJ Walker when it came to creating hair and beauty products, but the thing that created Walker's legacy was the idea of uplifting the race. Even Margo Jefferson mentioned the need to uplift the race being one of the main purposes of African Americans.

Even with the wrapped head, Aunt Jemima was a dominant force in mainstream America. Women of color went from slavery to a generation or two later setting the hairstyles that most Americans wanted. Abena Lewis-Mhoon wrote that in the early 1920s hairstyles started in Harlem, spread across New York City, then to the rest of American. "Marcel waves started with black people in Harlem."[14]

A coalition of Dove, National Urban League, Color of Change and Western Center of Law and Poverty lead the campaign for the Crown Act that wants to end discrimination in workplaces and schools over hair styles. Legislation started regulating the way people of color should look centuries ago, and they are looking to legislation to change that now.

Even though slaves had been charged with wearing something less, with being something less, they turned it into something more that they passed down for generations. Headdresses and wraps have become a powerful statement in African American culture. It has become something that is not only by and for African Americans, but it is something that is taught and shared.

Tanisha Ford talks about the love of bright colors. She said during slavery "vibrant colors and prints were part of the rural southern black style tradition, as they were in Africa."[15] Even in the early 20th Century African Americans began creating style innovations because they enjoyed

13 Grigby, Darcy Grimaldo, Still thinking About Olympia's Maid, The Art Bulletin, Dec 2015, 434.
14 Soul Thieves, ed Brown and Kopano, Foraging Fashion (Palgrave MacMillan2014) 67.
15 Ford, Liberated Threads, 54.

the fashion parade and the style shows they had on Sundays.[16]

Women, like Josephine Baker who took charge of her own sexuality and how it was to be portrayed, did not allow it to define her. Their beauty does not come from something that is an aesthetic attribute but comes from what they do and how it impacts others.

Through tremendous obstacles African Americans have taken a carving knife and created patterns for their lives that leave others envious. As a community, African Americans have moved past the periods of hot combs and skin lightning into a time of free for all. We have learned to celebrate the dark-skinned sisters with kinky curly hair, while still loving our fair skinned ones with European features.

Centuries later African Americans have slowly learned to redefine beauty by adding deeper skin tones, hair texture and not altering full features to images of themselves.
Even though we have made great strides with the mainstream which is beginning to share those beliefs.

There was an amazing moment in time in September of 2018 when several women of color were on the cover of mainstream magazines which included, Elle UK, Marie Claire, Porter, British Vogue, Glamour, Hollywood Reporter. These magazines featured Tiffany Haddish, Zendaya, Lupita Nyong'o, Tracee Ellis Ross, Slick Woods, Adwoa Aboah, Naomi Campbell, Issa Rae, Beyoncé, Rihanna and others were featured that month. The September issue is often twice as large with advertisements and is considered the premiere issue for showcasing trends. It was a once in a lifetime experience, but looking deeper, valuable stories are told in these images.

We are fortunate that there will be artist working to tell the story of beauty in a culture that is surrounded by pain. They will continue to celebrate the things that make them stand out.
Phil John Perry worked on the headdress for the image of Beyoncé Knowles Carter which was featured on the cover of Vogue magazine in 2018. This was the first image described. Vernon François was the hair stylist and Alexi Lubomirski was the photographer of the image of Serena Williams which was on the cover of Harper's Bazaar in 2019. Kwame Brathwaite was the photographer of Priscilla Bardonille from the Black Is Beautiful movement with the African

16 Ibid.

Jazz-Art Society and Studio (AJASS) in Harlem in 1962.

The men and women who work to represent the culture hold a powerful tool in their hands. They can impact the way generations see themselves. We seem to have moved past the day of reminding people to uplift the African American race to days of demonstrating what it looks like to each individual.

In the Golden Age of the African American image society is no longer limited to Caucasian men defining African American women's sexuality because these women do it themselves. These women chose for themselves how they will be defined in mainstream media by championing the things they like.

Yet this isn't an overnight process. Many women have been fighting for this a mighty long time in order to be comfortable in our own brown skin. This is a good thing because it gives beauty depth and width making it fuller and encompassing. Without different types of beauty, it is very one sided and doesn't reflect the entire world that it represents.

Rihanna launched her Fenty fashion[17] using images from Kwame Brathwaite's Black is Beautiful movement as inspiration. She stood on the shoulders of women who were ridiculed for their beliefs.

"Sometimes it takes the seed that you plant many years to germinate and sink in and blossom. I think what we are seeing is to an extent, the seeds that we planted in the 60s," said Bob Grumbs.

In the shadows of the Josephine Bakers, the Beyonces, Rihannas and Serenas have learned to sweep the audience off its feet and take them to any place they please.

Cover artwork by Natashna Anderson. Interior artwork by Karen J Anderson

17 https://hellobeautiful.com/3052073/grandassa-models-and-rihanna/, Accessed May 4, 2020