

Beauty is in the Eye of Trans People of Colour: Envisioning and Re-Envisioning Beauty through #DeGenderFashion and *Prim 'N Poppin'*

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Beauty manifests itself both as an intrinsic feeling and as a societal perception. In either regard, beauty has the potential to occupy a state of fluidity—rejecting binary notions of attractiveness and unattractiveness—and extending across gender, race, sexuality, ability, and so forth. Unfortunately, conceptualizing beauty beyond the binary does not prevent the *construction* of beauty ideals, those which privilege white, thin, cis-heteronormative, able-bodied individuals. The white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, as coined by bell hooks, ensures that beauty is upheld at its most normative. As a result, rejecting a stagnant understanding of beauty is undeniably queer. Doing so embraces those identities which are routinely excluded from mainstream characterizations of beauty.

Although certain queer bodies are gradually being accepted into the patriarchy's hegemonic visual culture, there remain parameters regarding which identities are deemed desirable and granted visibility. Queer people of colour, specifically trans identities, are afforded less privilege than white cisgender members of the queer community. In recognizing the omittance of trans people of colour from the mainstream beauty and fashion industries, the extent to which normative beauty ideals are ingrained within such spaces becomes apparent.

Through the form of an expository essay, this research explores the impacts and contributions of trans people of colour within the beauty and fashion industries, inherently dismantling aspirations of white, thin, able-bodied, cis-heterosexuality. In doing so, I remain aware that my identity as a queer, cisgender, white woman requires me to provide allyship in my writing without occupying the space of trans people of colour, whose voices and perspectives have historically been suppressed throughout such discourses. Moreover, as a white settler living on Treaty One Territory, ancestral land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Dakota, Dene, Oji-Cree, and Métis Nations, I acknowledge the assimilationist history of colonialism along with its imposition of a Eurocentric binary upon gender and sexuality.

My work begins by examining the activism of gender-nonconforming writer and artist ALOK, most notably their campaign to #DeGenderFashion. Subsequently, I consider the art series *Prim 'n Poppin'*, which re-envision vintage beauty advertisements by showcasing queer models of colour. In aiming to divulge how trans people of colour have broken boundaries in dismantling colonial gender expectations throughout the beauty and fashion industries, I highlight that through their work, these artists and activists envision and re-envision conceptions of beauty.

Throughout this essay, I utilize the umbrella term trans—that which may encompass, yet is not limited to, non-binary, gender fluid, gender non-conforming, two-spirit, and transgender identities. I diverge from this term only when individual artists, activists, and scholars are known to label themselves with one of these more specific identifiers.

#DeGenderFashion

American artist Alok Vaid-Menon (they/them), professionally known as ALOK, is recognized for their mixed-media projects, generally

pertaining to themes of “trauma, belonging, and the human condition” (“About”). ALOK’S gender fluid identity, as well as their Malaysian and Indian background, informs much of their work.

ALOK’s social media campaign #DeGenderFashion has amassed over 16,000 posts on Instagram alone, initiating a conversation about the potential for clothing to dismantle a binary understanding of gender. In 2019, ALOK introduced the concept of #DeGenderFashion in response to the vilification of trans identities, specifically those who reject normative constructions of gender as neither masculine nor feminine (ALOK, “Degendering Fashion”). ALOK’S subsequent Instagram post invites individuals to use the hashtag #DeGenderFashion as a means to “reclaim the narrative”—bringing trans people of colour to the forefront (@alokvmenon).

In an Instagram post from December 13th, 2019, ALOK poses in a geometric patterned blazer, floral harem pants, red striped socks, and silver short-heeled shoes. The ensemble is paired with pom-pom earrings and a violet lip. ALOK’s caption reads:

trans people / queer people / gender non-conforming people / people of color / people with disabilities / fat folks have been challenging gender fashion norms since the beginning. we have long experienced backlash for existing in public beyond gender norms — and our visibility throughout this vitriol has created the space for others. and yet — media publications + society writ large continue to laud (white) cis people as the vanguard of gender neutral fashion + faces of the “new masculinity” simply for wearing sequins in one photo shoot or...pink...on a red carpet. our genius is separated from us + travels to the mainstream through whiteness, masculinity, + cisness. (@alokvmenon, “The future of fashion is genderless”)

Through their campaign, ALOK brings attention to the fact that the white cis-heteronormative gaze informs gender binaries within the realms of beauty and fashion. Trans narratives are thus reduced and homogenized as a means to “service cisgender people’s comfort” (Gray). For instance, in the fall of 2020, Harry Styles, who is white, became the first man to appear alone on the cover of *Vogue* (ALOK, “#DeGenderFashion”). The cover shoot made headlines due to Styles’ identity as male; however, it gained most of its traction because Styles chose to wear a gown. Given the binary construction of gender, that which is made visible in media through masculine or feminine presentation, Styles’ milestone does push certain boundaries for gender queer visibility. Nevertheless, in selecting Styles to be the first man on its cover, one dressed in effeminate attire, *Vogue* privileges a cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, white male while promoting a gender fluid approach to the realms of beauty and fashion.

ALOK does not shy away from calling out the inherent racism of casting Harry Styles as the unofficial representative of trans identities in fashion. *Vogue*’s decision reinstates that the beauty and fashion industries disregard the histories and strides of trans people of colour. Colonial systems of power have historically marginalized individuals whose identities lie outside the gender binary. Rae Gray, who writes from her position as an Indian trans woman, suggests that “to examine gender nonconformity and even queerness, is to examine the effects of colonization” (Gray). The privileging of Eurocentric bodies also neglects the presence of gender-nonconformity and gender fluidity in communities of colour prior to colonization. In accounting for the cultural loss and trauma that result from colonial histories, Gray articulates the following:

For many people of color, there is an uncomfortable reckoning with how much we must relate to our genders through concepts and language codified by our oppressors. No one considers how difficult it may be for us to regain an

authentic sense of identity within cultures whose own gender traditions were repressed and forgotten. The process may be confusing for cisgender people, but it is painful for us, both in how much trauma there is to cope with and the actual violence that's invited when we dare to be our authentic selves. (Gray)

The colonial erasure of identities outside the gender binary, including two-spirit people, hijras in India, baklâ in the Philippines, and mähū in Native Hawaiian culture (Gray), contextualises Gray's longing for language and teachings that stem from pre-colonial cultural traditions amongst communities of colour. Conversations surrounding gender often revolve around the concerns and judgements of cis-heterosexual people. Gray reiterates the pain and trauma felt by trans people of colour who are subject to social marginalization based on their identity, yet also as a result of assimilationist systems of colonial power—those which have defined gender as binary.

When opportunities arise to explore beauty and fashion beyond the gender binary, and are subsequently co-opted by privileged bodies, as was the case with Vogue featuring Harry Styles for its cover shoot, trans people of colour receive the message that “[their] aesthetics make it to the mainstream, but not [their] bodies” (ALOK, “#DeGenderFashion”). Despite the multitude of cultural and racial histories that affirm trans identities, mainstream visual culture contributes and adheres to the ongoing colonial project by omitting trans people of colour from its milestones within the realms of beauty and fashion. Black non-binary writer Treavian Simmons reveals, “by not seeing important facets of one’s identity in the media they consume, non-binary persons (and especially those of color) can be left in a fragmented state, constantly searching for representation in an accessible mainstream” (Simmons). Media has the potential to be a space of self-affirmation and self-discovery; however, in failing

to see themselves represented, trans people of colour are pushed to the outskirts of society and rendered invisible.

The call to #DeGenderFashion is not merely based in permitting feminine and masculine presenting individuals to defy traditional gender norms by fluctuating between the binary of male or female clothing. The campaign aims to dismantle the notion that clothing holds any relationship to gender entirely. ALOK asserts that “conflating a skirt with womanhood is not only sartorially unambitious, but culturally imperialist” (ALOK, “To Infinity and Beyond”). Drawing from their Indian culture, ALOK cites the lunghi, similar to a sarong, as an item of clothing traditionally worn by South Asian men yet perceived by the Western gaze as a skirt (ALOK, “To Infinity and Beyond”). The conflation between a lunghi and a skirt as items of clothing is proof that binary conceptions of gender, and in turn fashion, are colonial.

In an Instagram post from December 21st, 2021, ALOK wears a vertically striped, green and white ankle length dress, along with heels decked in multicoloured straps. ALOK’s pink eyeliner wing compliments their pink hair. They write in their caption:

I’d like to think I get dressed without paying attention to gender. It’s irrelevant to my creative process. I wear what I want to wear, regardless of gender norms. In fact – I find that gender norms can be one of the biggest impediments to style. (@alokvmenon, “My style is continually unfolding”)

ALOK’s Instagram feed exemplifies the sartorial fluidity for which #DeGenderFashion advocates, highlighting how the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’s fashion binaries can be dismantled.

Degendering Fashion to Envision Beauty

In advocating for a conception of fashion beyond the gender binary, ALOK envisions an image of beauty that actively rejects the white, thin, able-bodied, cis-heterosexual body as being normative. Furthermore, their efforts to prioritise the contributions of trans people of colour redirects the spotlight away from normative beauty ideals—granting reclamation of and liberation to these identities.

In an Instagram post from June 28th, 2021, ALOK is photographed in a rose-printed, v-neck midi dress, along with golden platform heels. Their caption reads:

Fashion was one of my first languages. I grew up in a world that said that people like me didn't exist – one where there were no words to describe what I was and what I felt. So I used clothing to communicate on my own terms. I've been involved with fashion in various capacities since then, but at the core what keeps coming me back is a commitment to visual storytelling. Mobile poetry. (@alokvmenon, "Fashion was one of my first languages")

ALOK's embrace of fashion in response to a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy seeking to render trans people of colour invisible intersects with the work of Latina scholars Natalie Havlin and Jillian M. Báez. They ask: "How do marginalized communities engage in beauty practices as forms of survival and resistance?" (Havlin and Báez 14). ALOK suggests an approach to challenging the contradictory constructions of normative beauty ideals, stating:

We are taught to desire the very things that destroy us, and we are taught to fear the very things that have the potential to set us free. Finding beauty in that which we have been told is abject and disposable has profound implications. It's about

challenging the core logics and hierarchies that underpin, well, everything. (qtd. in Berne 246)

Despite the risks that trans identities and people of colour encounter in embodying their authentic selves, doing so offers them even greater potential for liberation. Rejecting the gender binary that permeates the fashion industry exudes beauty in itself.

Prim ‘n Poppin’

Beauty and fashion advertisements, encountered from an early age, serve to establish beauty ideals that privilege white, thin, cis-heteronormative, able-bodied individuals. The lack of diverse representation in contemporary advertising remains a significant cause for concern. In response to this absence of representation, specifically that of queer people of colour, beauty photographer Julia Comita, and makeup artist Brenna Drury, produced the photography series *Prim ‘n Poppin’*. Debuting in early 2021, *Prim ‘n Poppin’* re-visions beauty advertisements from the 1970s, while considering the following:

What would society look like today if inclusivity was standard practice in advertising 30 years ago? This is both posed and answered by the artists. *Prim ‘n Poppin’* is a portal into a diverse and non-binary makeup world where the ritual of beauty is all about the magic you put into it. A place where models are characters that allure the viewer into a story about the products and their individual narratives. The images of *Prim ‘n Poppin’* reminiscence [*sic*] of stories that could have been told, and the ones we can still tell. (Ntuen)

The series, which maintains a vintage aesthetic, includes five mock advertisements featuring queer models of colour. Comita and Drury’s intentions behind the project are reflected in the name itself—with the term “prim” connoting a vintage appeal, and “poppin”

highlighting a fresh and modern take (Kucharski). The models, Maria Rivera (she/her), Kaguya (she/they), Cory Walker (they/them), Jesi Taylor Cruz (they/she), Ava Trilling (she/her), and Coral Johnson-McDaniel (they/them) are diverse in race, gender identity, and size (“Prim ‘N Poppin’”). As a result, *Prim ‘n Poppin’* works to redefine which bodies are made visible in the realms of beauty and fashion. Given that the visual nature of advertising traditionally appeals to the male cis-heteronormative gaze, there is incredible value in “subvert[ing] industry standards that position white heterosexual male desire as a singular selling point” (Sanders). In re-envisioning the 1970s through diverse modelling, *Prim ‘n Poppin’* challenges social perceptions of the body, race, and binary identity—specifically during a period that “idealized white standards of beauty” (Kucharski).

Although the 1970s are often regarded as a decade of monumental moments in beauty and fashion, this success originated at the expense of a diverse and inclusive industry. Patricia Berne, a Japanese-Haitian queer disabled woman, is the co-founder of the disability justice performance project titled *Sins Invalid*. Berne expresses that “as marginalized peoples, we’ve been positioned to be in conflict with our bodies” (Berne 241). Individuals who do not conform or adhere to normative standards of beauty are expected to desire what they do not possess, fostering an aversive relationship between themselves, their body, and their identity. Furthermore, Berne’s argument aligns with the historical pathologizing of bodies that diverge from society’s white, thin, cis-heterosexual, able-bodied ideal. Once one becomes aware that normative beauty is a social construction, light is shed on the fact that the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’s perception of ugliness is in itself also constructed. Just as it was in the 1970s, beauty remains “deeply informed, distorted, and manipulated by capitalism” (qtd. in Berne 243). Thus, projects such as *Prim ‘n Poppin’* challenge both constructions of beauty and constructions of the ugly—re-envisioning the politics of visibility and desirability.

Re-envisioning Beauty Beyond Aesthetic

Beyond the visual component of *Prim 'n Poppin'* as a photography series, each advertisement is accompanied by an interview with the model. Trans visual culture is too often reduced to “surface aesthetics” (qtd. in Alabanza 38)—making a spectacle of the trans body. NIC Kay, a Black trans performer and choreographer, remarks that “there is a thin line between being a trans person making performances and one’s transness being witnessed as performance” (qtd. in Alabanza 47). The interviews conducted as part of the *Prim 'n Poppin'* series work to ensure that trans models, most of whom are models of colour, are not objectified nor marginalized as mere visual aesthetic for the male cis-heteronormative gaze. Upon being asked, “What is still lacking from current beauty advertising?” Black trans model Coral Johnson-McDaniel responds:

Warmth. It’s so rare that I see a beauty ad and feel like I just had a strong hug. That comes from capturing real people, their real emotions, their real beauty. (Johnson-McDaniel)

In response to the same question, Jesi Taylor Cruz, a Black trans model living with vitiligo, echoes Johnson-McDaniel’s sentiments:

Self-awareness and honesty. Fat people. People with facial difference[s]. Disabled people. A look at what goes on behind-the-scenes. Transparency about how the industry works. In short: a commitment to something other than profit and making people feel like they need to change something about themselves in order to have value or be deemed beautiful. (Cruz)

The prioritising of aesthetics over people is at the forefront of the beauty and fashion industries. The interview contributes to creating

an intimate creative space for the models to express themselves and affords them agency over their artistic narrative.

The ability for trans people of colour to activate and redefine beauty on their own terms is inherently political. Canadian artist and activist Vivek Shraya (she/her), whose work is influenced by her Indian culture and experience as a trans woman, emphasises the power of selfies in asserting agency over representations of the self. Trans people of colour are deprived of visual depictions of themselves—that which affirm their identities. Shraya credits selfie-taking as an “accessible form of self-love” (Shraya 662), one which also challenges the white cis-heteronormative gaze. Given that social media poses the risk of promoting a white cis-heteronormative able-bodied aesthetic, selfies taken by trans people of colour also work to “reclaim the gaze” or “return the gaze back to [themselves].” Shraya confirms that selfie-taking allows her to “essentially own the gaze” (Shraya 661). Although their re-envisioning of representation for trans people of colour may differ, the photography and interviews from the *Prim ‘n Poppin’* series resonate with Vivek Shraya’s position on selfies as a method of controlling the gaze.

Conclusion on Envisioning and Re-envisioning

Both #DeGenderFashion and *Prim ‘n Poppin’*, although unique in their approaches to expand representations of trans people of colour in the beauty and fashion industries, offer valuable visions of beauty—those that reject normative aesthetics privileging white, thin, cis-heteronormative, able-bodied identities. Furthermore, these works, primarily created by and featuring trans people of colour, promote a visual culture that is accessible and affirming. Through their social media campaign to #DeGenderFashion, ALOK actively rejects gender binaries, using fashion as a mode of expression that allows them to envision, feel, and express their beauty. On the other hand, *Prim ‘n Poppin’* re-envisioning vintage beauty culture, capturing images which reflect and give voice to queer models of colour.

Envisioning and re-envisioning are not inherently dichotomous, as each approach works to inform and influence the other. The envisioning of a fashion industry beyond gender and the re-envisioning of diverse beauty advertisements speak to the intersections of visual culture and activism. While envisioning and re-envisioning are productive approaches to creating affirming representation for trans people of colour, it is just as necessary for this representation to go beyond assertions of existence and survival. In the words of NIC Kay, “making work from a place of ‘we deserve to live’ is a profoundly difficult place to work from” (qtd. in Alabanza 51). Trans people of colour deserve to experience intrinsic and extrinsic beauty that is not merely appreciated for its divergence from social perceptions of normativity. These identities embody a fluidity inherent to beauty, that which merits recognition and celebration in itself.

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