



RACIALICIOUS - THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND POP CULTURE



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WHERE MY SISTAS AT? THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF BLACK PLUS SIZE MODELS IN MAINSTREAM FASHION

by Guest Contributor Tasha Fierce, originally published at [Red Vinyl Shoes](#)



Something is lacking in the current push to include plus-size models in mainstream fashion publications (or "separate-but-equal" media outlets such as Vogue Italia's "Vogue Curvy"). What's lacking, specifically in the fashion establishment but less so in the satellite world of "fatshion" blogging, is representation of models/women of color. I want to speak specifically about black plus size models/women because there is a very particular perception of blackness conflated with female fatness as compared to other races, and it's an identity I inhabit on a daily basis.

A popular (white) misconception is that fat is more acceptable in the black community. This is patently untrue. Hip-hop culture is often pointed to when one is making this argument. If you watch any hip-hop music videos at all, it's clear to see that the fat on the women featured is in specific places. Booty, hips, tits. As the inimitable Sir Mix-A-Lot stated, "When a girl walks in with an *itty-bitty waist* and a *round thing* [booty] in your face, you get sprung." (emphasis supplied) There is definitely a line between acceptable fat and unacceptable fat. Those fat women who are fortunate enough to be considered

"thick" are subject to an even more extreme hypersexualization of their bodies than average sized or thin black women are. As the features considered sexually desirable not only by black men but also white men are exaggerated on a fat female body, these women are often portrayed as more sexually available, yet can also be portrayed as ghetto princess or hoochie — "Jezebel" and "Sapphire". But cross that line dividing "thick fat" and "just fat" and you quickly enter the territory of the desexualized fat black woman: the Precious, the mammy. Let's take the recent example of Gabourey Sidibe, who portrayed Precious, and who basically served as a dumping ground for all the issues people have with fat, specifically, black female fat. This is the type of fat black woman continually mocked by black men in drag. Namely, characters like Eddie Murphy's Rasputia in *Norbit*, Tyler Perry's Madea in any number of his movies, Martin Lawrence's Shanaynay and Big Mama, and Jamie Foxx's Wanda on *In Living Color*. These characters are either considered too old to be sexual and are subject to the mammy stereotype, or their sexuality is portrayed as a joke, something disgusting to be avoided. Clearly the black community is not the utopia of body acceptance white America often believes it to be.

Of course, the way fat is treated in the black community only reflects how fat is treated in mainstream culture and the fashion community. However, as "curvy" — not too fat, now — is becoming more acceptable in the fashion world, it's clear the main shade of acceptable curvy is white. When *Glamour* magazine featured 7 nude plus size models in their November 2009 issue, only one — Anansa Sims, daughter of straight size supermodel Beverly Johnson — was black or even of color. This despite the fact that there are many more black plus size models out there, and despite the fact that the fat fashion blogosphere — an engine driving the plus sized clothing industry — is filled with examples of fat black women interested in fashion and modeling their clothes. In fact, one of the first and most popular fat fashion blogs, *Young Fat & Fabulous*, is run by a black woman.

So why are black, female, fat fashion bloggers, many of whom drive considerable income towards the plus size fashion industry via their blogs, not seeing themselves adequately represented in this new curvy trend? The "fatshion" movement has made it obvious to the mainstream fashion establishment that there is a market out there for fashion-forward clothing in larger sizes. Any survey of the fatshion blogosphere will tell you that a great percentage of that market is black. Why are mainstream fashion mags so reluctant to include black plus size models in their spreads, and why do the "high fat fashion" retailers use all white faces as their representatives? It definitely has something to do with the aversion to using black straight size models on runways and in fashion spreads. Unless you're Alex Wek and the photographer needs the color of the clothes to "pop" against your dark skin. If thin blackness is unwelcome, imagine a double-whammy

of fat blackness. Since black women's bodies tend to have an exaggeratedly feminine shape, it could be the tendency of fashion designers to pick androgynous shapes to model their clothes. Plus size white models don't usually have a very exaggerated sexualized shape. So this goes back to society's issues with black women's bodies in general. Since black women are stereotyped so often as being loose or hypersexual, any emphasis placed on sexualized body parts due to their size compounds the problem. Better to leave that can of worms alone and just work with the non-black models.

Until the straight size world fully accepts their black models, plus size black models are unlikely to achieve any more success than their thin sisters. Unfortunately neither of these things seem likely to happen soon. We as plus size women are expected to be happy with what we're given, sighing "At least we're making some progress." Yet in the fashion world progress is so often followed by regress. We as fashion consumers and drivers of commerce need to continue to work to represent our diversity in the hopes that mainstream fashion will take notice, and that this won't just be another trend. Hopefully the increasing popularity of blogs such as Young Fat and Fabulous, [Musings of a Fatshionista](#), and on the Latina spectrum, [Fatshionable](#) will send a message to the plus size fashion establishment that we want representation of all plus size women, not just the white models we see all too often in plus size spreads. Tokenism is not acceptable. Throwing one model of color in there to satisfy all people of color is unacceptable. Real diversity needs to occur before the typical plus size fashion model truly reflects those who drive the industry's commerce. Retailers need to recognize the power these plus size blogging titans wield. Just by posting an outfit they threw on, these bloggers can inspire hundreds of fat women to go out and buy the exact same outfit.

This is an ongoing problem mirrored by the lack of meaningful inclusion of straight size black models, and like that problem, it will only be solved if we continually critique the fashion establishment and in the case of fat fashion, unpack the privilege that white plus size models (and white plus size women) enjoy at this point. Until the facts of the situation are laid bare, no work can be done to change it. With this, I'm attempting to lay down a foundation and start a dialog.

ABOUT THIS BLOG

Racialicious is a blog about the intersection of race and pop culture. Check out our daily updates on the latest celebrity gaffes, our no-holds-barred critique of questionable media representations, and of course, the inevitable ~~Keanu Reeves~~ John Cho