

Alek Wek

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If only they knew she had the power

Alek Wek was born in a small town in southern Sudan called Wau, which is pronounced 'wow', what most people think when they see her for the first time, and what they think every time they see her smile. Wek never set out to be a model, or a model this super. She was a skinny teenage refugee from the Dinka tribe living in London after fleeing a violent civil war when she was discovered in 1995 at a street fair by a Models 1 scout. While Wek was living with her relocated family, studying art on a scholarship, and sweeping hair at a salon, modelling was a way to support her family, not a vehicle for becoming America's Next Top Anything.

(HER 2007 AUTOBIOGRAPHY *Alek: From Sudanese Refugee to International Supermodel* tells her unbelievable stories.) She didn't know the brilliance of Edward Enninful when he styled her for a futuristic Burger King advertisement in 1995 and then talked her up to François Nars who used her in a campaign for his make-up line. "For me, fashion has been an amazing experience," says the model, designer of the handbag line Wek 1933 (named for the birth year of her father who died before they could leave Africa), and member of the U.S. Committee for Refugees' Advisory Council. "When you weigh the negative and the positive there's so much that's positive. Fashion brings so many people together from around the world. It's amazing, our opportunities. We have such a loud voice in our community and we should use that."

Over the past year in Manhattan, there has been a series of high-profile discussions addressing the state of black representation in fashion organised by Bethann Hardison, a model in the '60s and '70s who championed diversity as an agent for Tyson Beckford, Talisa Soto, Veronica Webb and others (she is also the mother of Kadeem Hardison who played the style icon Dwayne Wayne on *The Cosby Show* spin-off *A Different World*). The first of these events was the most impressive and succinct; it took place during September '07 in a small screening room in the Bryant Park Hotel and was called "The Lack Of The Black Image In Fashion Today". Moderated by Hardison, Naomi Campbell (who talked about how Christy Turlington refused certain shows unless Naomi was cast as well), Liya Kebede, Andre Leon Talley, Iman, Tyson Beckford, Michael Vollbracht, Ivan Bart of IMG Models, and about 60 other designers, models, stylists, photographers, editors, journalists and agents had the kind of challenging, impassioned discussion about social politics one expects from students not fashion makers. Hardison read aloud from a review of Calvin Klein's Spring 2008 show by Cathy Horyn, the fashion critic for *The New York Times*, who praised the collection but also wrote, "All of the models in the show were white, with hair at a uniform length. You can't tell women to be individuals in their style and then not show a range of individual faces, hairstyles and ethnic backgrounds. It seems out of touch." This was applauded. A human rights attorney explained that if one was inclined to take legal action, according to the American justice system, agencies are the most appropriate targets for discrimination suits.

Wek could not attend the event and her point of view was missed. Her perspective is unique, as even among models of colour she is sometimes considered "ethnic" because of her dark complexion and African features. Wek's opinions are firm but magnanimous. She is a generous conversationalist and almost touchingly gracious. There is no complaining. She is down-to-earth to the point that she still sleeps on the futon she carried on her back up the stairs of her first apartment on Orchard Street on the Lower East Side of New York City – although now it rests on a sleigh frame in her Fort Greene brownstone that she lovingly renovates with her boyfriend of five years. When I relay to her the comments of several of the participants at the privileged first forum who slighted catalogue models and "video girls" (making clear that class adds another dimension to the race conversation), Wek responds without hesitation, "Work is work." The tumult of her younger years also affords her refreshing insight, for example, her take on the ongoing debate over model skinniness. Early in her career, Wek was asked to lose weight for an Italian *Vogue* shoot with Steven Meisel. "I've nearly starved, literally, a few times over the years," she wrote in her autobiography. "It's always clear when someone has been hungry for a long time, because they tend to become depressed and listless. I've felt that, not because I needed to fit into a dress but because I was a refugee. I don't ever want to feel like that again." She says that when she met Meisel he never mentioned her weight. She wore Gianni Versace for the shoot. ➤

Wek has overcome her challenges so elegantly and with such good humour that her thoughts on some unspoken, seemingly offbeat concerns were welcome. What does she think of black models styled in animal prints? In the past year, a well-regarded European fashion magazine featured an all-black cast dressed in animal prints posed in and around cages, which is the kind of imagery that the most rudimentary sensitivity training rails against; perhaps the creatives involved were aware of the significance of their choices and perhaps it was commentary after all, although the context suggested otherwise. "There were so many shoots where I was insulted, I was like, 'I'm not doing that, I'm sorry,'" says Wek, who agreed to wear a leopard print bikini for her attention-getting break in the 1995 music video for Tina Turner's theme song for the James Bond movie *Goldeneye*. "I'm like, that's your only imagination? I mean I'm a small town girl from a completely different culture and if I can think beyond that, there's something wrong with you."

At the "The Lack Of The Black Image In Fashion Today", the visionary Patti Wilson was applauded for the Spring 2008 Heatherette show she styled, that was notable for the ten black models, led by Chanel Iman who opened the presentation. Not discussed at the forum was that the looks they wore were mostly white – the designer's standard lollipop palette appeared afterwards – which seemed to either celebrate the models or fetishise their skin tones, or something in between. I mention this to Wek and bring up her groundbreaking November 1997 *Elle* cover for which she wore white Giorgio Armani against a stark white background. (Gilles Bensimon, who photographed the image, told *The New York Times*, "It was a small statement, but the statement is, 'Nobody is out, everybody is in'." He went on to compare what Wek did for black beauty with what Kate Moss did for "unconventional" beauty.) Wek cautions against alarmism. "The *Elle* cover was a white suit but it wasn't because it was a white suit; it was because it was Armani. Just having the cover was really amazing. It blows my mind when we overdo something. We really have to balance it out," she says. "You definitely want to talk about it. But I don't want to make myself look like, 'Oh poor me, people were always racist towards me', because people were not. If everyone was racist I wouldn't be around."

Alek is also not the type to shy away from calling attention to things she finds objectionable. She appeared in a 1997 calendar produced by Lavazza, the Italian coffee company, for which she posed nude in an enormous white espresso cup. She writes in her memoir how her skin "was to be the espresso" and how she "can't help but compare [the photographs] to all the images of black people that have been used in marketing over the decades. There was the big-lipped jungle-dweller on the blackamoor ceramic mugs sold in the '40s; the golliwog badges given away with jam; Little Black Sambo, who decorated the walls of an American restaurant chain in the 1960s; and Uncle Ben, whose apparently benign image still sells rice." When asked about her comment, which was picked up by *The New York Post's* Page Six gossip column, Wek said, "Looking back I don't regret doing it, because it was a great photographer, it was a great stylist, and I would never go into something that degrades or exploits me, but I didn't want people to just think that I was posing and taking advantage of my skin colour. I had to remind people that you can't just take the easy way out." When an airline representative wouldn't allow Wek into a business lounge three years ago in a Frankfurt airport, Wek contacted the head of the airline and reported the incident. "Oh, you're not going to get away with it with me," she says with a smile.

But it should not be inferred that Wek's worldclass body of work is constantly riddled with racial strife and burdened with politics. She is more than a symbol. In fact, most of the time she is just stunningly beautiful, whether she's modelling at couture or briefly appearing in Janet Jackson's incredible 1996 *Got 'Til It's Gone* video which references Malick Sidibé, the photographer who documented popular culture in Mali in the 1960's. "That's what I'm talking about," Wek says. "You've done your homework."

The big question of the day is still where are all of the black models? Their presence on the New York runways did not spike despite Hardison's efforts and supportive public statements by Diane Von Furstenberg, the president of the Council of Fashion Designers of America. (Although it was a good season if you were Jourdan Dunn). To start, Wek thinks it's not always the designers who make these decisions but their support staff who might not be able to anticipate their vision. "Everyone has to take responsibility," she says. "Agents, art directors, stylists, all have to play a role." I mention how the editor of a predominantly black style magazine – or however it might be better described – complained at the first forum that modelling agencies no longer gave him top tier black models. Another editor made the point that if he wants those models, he has to up his game with more competitive images. "Money has no colour, I'm telling you," Wek says. "If you don't step your game up, then don't hate the players, hate the game." Then she reflects on the bigger picture. "Asian girls aren't being represented. Do you see them on the runway? Maybe one or two. Do you see Puerto Rican girls? Cuban girls? Arab girls? No. Fashion is not easy and not just for black girls," says Wek, who benefited from the progressive foresight of agents like Mora Rowe and Maja Edmondson. "Not every single white girl makes it either."

In *Alek*, Wek says that skin pigment is largely a matter of geography, that those who live in warmer areas will develop darker skin as protection from the sun, and those who live in northern areas will develop lighter skin to more effectively use the limited sunrays to manufacture vitamin D. "My skin has both helped me and hurt me in my career," she writes. Which begged the question that Hardison raised at her maiden forum, and which I ask of Wek: Are you a model or a black model? "I'm a model first of all. And I'm really dark with Sudanese features on top of it, too. In fashion, if I had to look to other women to try and relate to I would have been really discouraged. Black is a part of me, that's my skin just like any other woman has. But what truly makes a woman is being able to accept all of what you are," she says. "You cannot eliminate one thing or the other." Wek might not have anticipated the turns our conversation would take, but she handily rose to the occasion. "It's good to talk about things we don't talk about," she says. "How boring would it be if we were all the same? Seriously." 🗨️

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