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# An Analysis of Stereotyping and Commodification in *America's Next Top Model*

*America's Next Top Model* (*ANTM*) was a television institution of the 2000s that captivated audiences with the competition to see which ordinary girl would become the next glamorous modeling star. Hosted by Tyra Banks, the show was often praised for its diversity and inclusivity, featuring women of many races and backgrounds in the competition, with Tyra herself a successful black supermodel. This allowed the show to bask in the warm glow of progressivism during a cultural period where the beauty standards were still predominantly white. However, underneath this presentation of diversity, the show utilized racial stereotypes and exoticized caricatures as marketing tools, encouraging audiences and potential clients to view the racial differences as sexy and appealing rather than genuinely representative. In doing this, *America's Next Top Model* commodifies femininity through racial stereotyping and humiliation, turning the girls' identities into marketable ideas for entertainment and profit.

When I think of *America's Next Top Model*, I think of the opening sequence when Tyra Banks looks directly at you sitting on your couch from inside the television, asking, "You wanna be on top?", before cutting to a low-quality montage and title card of racially diverse, beautiful women. Diversity has always been an intentional brand image for this show, because it marketed itself as different from the other popular reality TV shows of the time, which featured mainly white casts with one or two token people of color. Tyra Banks became an inspiration for young women of color because she frequently spoke out about how she had been sidelined in the

modeling industry for being a black woman, and *ANTM* was her way of giving other women a chance in a predatory industry. She openly welcomed contestants of all different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds and preached that every girl would be given the same fighting chance to win the coveted modeling contract awarded at the end of the show. Unfortunately, this idea of a progressive, fair, and diverse modeling competition fell apart in the first cycle.

The most notable target of cycle one's racial stereotyping was Ebony Haith, a black woman whom Tyra outed as a lesbian without consent on the show. Ebony was frequently shown clashing with the other girls, being defensive during judging panels, and described by the judges as having "a chip on her shoulder". Ebony was edited to fit the angry black woman stereotype, almost certainly because production either subconsciously or consciously knew that it would feel familiar to the audience. The angry black woman trope has existed in Hollywood for decades, and despite Tyra Banks' portrayal of the show as separate from traditional modeling, she still reinforced that Ebony could not be successful outside of a racial stereotype. Ebony has been open about how the show mischaracterized her and how it negatively affected her identity for years afterward, with Tyra Banks denying any personal responsibility, defaulting to the strict standards of the modeling world. *ANTM*'s faux diversity only functioned within the guidelines of marketability, i.e., the contestants could only embrace their culture or race in a way that was palatable to the audience.

This problematic attitude surrounding race also leaned into fetishization on several occasions. Dark-skinned black women were always wild, ethnic, and untamable in their photos, whereas Latina women were always feisty and promiscuous. The audience and the contestants were encouraged to believe that this was empowering and that it embraced one's culture. Still, the crux of this issue and the show in general is that stereotypes are *not* authentic portrayals of a

culture. The infamous race swap incident of cycle four, which happened again in cycle thirteen, featured the girls switching ethnicities for photo shoots to spoon-feed the show's diversity to the audience, but it was received poorly, and neither episode is available on standard streaming of the show. The girls were instructed to embody the race that they were assigned to portray, but it ended with the girls simply portraying offensive cultural stereotypes, because there is no way to effectively embody a different race than what they are without reducing it to a collection of identifiable stereotypes. Tyra Banks and the other judges also frequently told girls outside of their photos to lean into common stereotypes to market themselves like the Latina spitfire, the sweet Asian woman, or the ethnic African beauty. These specifically singled out the women of color as desirable *because* they were "exotic" or visually exciting, forcing them to condense themselves to a stereotype to please the judges. The show framed their race as a sort of natural sex appeal that had to exist in the very thin realm of racially diverse but still within the white American beauty standard that ruled the 2000s modeling industry.

Within this fetishization, there was also a humiliation aspect of the show that garnered a significant amount of attention from audiences, being the makeover episodes. These were a staple of *America's Next Top Model*, where Tyra would assign each of the girls a new "look" to make them more model-esque and hireable. In the early cycles, these consisted of haircuts and a new makeup look, but as the show progressed, they started offering more extreme alterations like closing and widening gapped teeth, skin treatments, and the lace-front beard weave incident of cycle twenty-one. While sometimes successful, the makeovers definitely had a racial motivation behind them; for example, Tyra would frequently give Black women long, straight weaves or giant curly weaves, Asian girls almost always got straight across bangs, and Latina girls often got big, "fierce" blowouts without any real change to their hair. However, when someone was

deemed to be a problematic contestant, Tyra would go out of her way to reassert control over the girl by chopping all her hair off or dyeing it a hideous color just to show that she could.

Some memorable examples are Cassandra Jean from cycle five and Danielle Evans from cycle six. Cassandra was a white, pageant girl from Texas, who started with long brown hair, and made it clear that she was extremely resistant to cutting it short. Tyra quickly labelled her as "bratty" and gave her a choppy, platinum blonde pixie cut that had Cassandra in tears until she was eliminated. Danielle Evans entered the show with a gap between her two front teeth, which she elected not to close against Tyra's wishes, and was subsequently berated at the judging panel in episode eight, where Tyra famously asked, "Do you really think you can have a CoverGirl contract with a gap in your mouth?" Tyra Banks' stated purpose behind these dramatic changes was to acclimatize the girls to the idea that the modelling industry would require them to change their appearances according to the client. While this is true to some extent, the makeovers also served to control and humiliate the girls into performing for the cameras. In doing this, the show demonstrated that the girls were still forced to comply with the commercial beauty standards of the time, against Tyra's stated goal of changing the modelling industry.

*America's Next Top Model* is beauty standards, capitalism, and racial stereotypes packaged into a reality TV drama for the average American woman to enjoy. The racial stereotyping served to make the girls more familiar and marketable, but it also stripped them of their individuality, perpetuating the harmful idea that races are monoliths that lack internal diversity. The racial fetishization of women of color that the show engaged in dehumanized them, and made it much easier for audiences to defame and insult the women without acknowledging that they were real people. Both of these things occurred in the name of profit, without regard for how it would affect the contestants or the audiences. The neatly packaged,

racially diverse, fantasy women that the show portrayed have never been real, and it is harmful to show young women that this is the only way to be successful in the modern-day modelling industry. Although *America's Next Top Model* presented itself as progressive and empowering, it became another example of how attempts at diversity can become exploitative when the focus is on money rather than authentic representation.