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A Memoir

ANDRÉ

LEON TALLEY

THE CHIFFON TRENCHES

Photograph by Arthur Elgort

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By André Leon Talley

About the Author

How I got over, how I got over My soul looks back and wonders how I got over —CLARA WARD

INTRODUCTION

For more than four decades, I went through a series of voyages with *Vogue* magazine and its editor in chief, Anna Wintour, the most powerful person in fashion. I was a fixture, a force, and a fierce advocate of fashion and style.

When I was an adolescent, *Vogue* was my inspiration. When other kids were tacking up baseball cards to their bedroom walls, mine were filled with the pages of the world's most influential fashion magazine. To my twelve-year-old self, raised in the segregated South, the idea of a black man playing any kind of role in this world seemed an impossibility. To think of where I've come from, where we've come from, in my lifetime, and where we are today, is amazing.

And yet, of course, we still have so far to go.

As I write this, I have just seen Beyoncé Knowles-Carter's September 2018 *Vogue* cover. It is, in some ways, another in a long line of fantastic images that made it through the meticulous process of becoming the cover of *Vogue*.

And then, in other ways, it stands alone.

This picture, and what it represents, is hugely important and significant. When you look at this cover and you know that Anna Wintour, whose exquisite taste has defined *Vogue* for decades, gave Beyoncé creative control of her cover

and cover story, then you start to understand its importance. And it was the *September* issue, the biggest issue in the yearly lineup! Beyoncé is an incredible tsunami of talent and power. She cannot be defined through the cultural standards that define *Vogue*; Beyoncé defines herself.

When I first saw this cover, I knew it was history in the making. Chosen at Beyoncé's suggestion, photographer Tyler Mitchell, at only twenty-three years old, became the first black man to shoot a cover image in the 125-year history of one of the most prestigious magazines to ever exist.

Beyoncé stands out on a lawn somewhere outdoors, no big expensive studio.

There's a flowing white sheet on a line, like laundry, as a backdrop.

Besides the rococo fresh flower arrangement on her head, Beyoncé's dressed simply, in a long Gucci dress. Her makeup, natural. Her skin moisturized and her knees exposed, and firmly together. No apologies or nuance or overt sexuality.

That image conjures for me laundry drying in the fresh open air. Mitchell's photograph suggests the laundress, that bygone station, delivering white linens to the white master's big white house. Crisp, immaculate whiteness. Cicely Tyson in the film *Souder*, making money to feed her sharecropping family; my great-grandmother and grandmother, doing the weekly laundry, backs bent and weary in fatigue, just another duty in line with their responsibility for the "cleanliness is next to godliness" creed that is part of humble living.

In all its elegance, the sheet symbolizes so many black women, in their own confident beauty, who did laundry to survive, to provide for their families, to put food on the table. I find it subtly very black. Basic and black. Black with style.

As Mitchell so aptly pointed out in a *Vogue* interview about the shoot: "For so long, black people have been considered things."

I see the influence of Kara Walker, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston, along with the unnamed armies of black mothers and maids working for whites to keep food on their own tables. That's amazing to me. The scene is fresh, unprecedented, and without parallel in the history of *Vogue* fashion covers.

Knowledge is power.

Fittingly, in the corresponding pages of *Vogue*, Beyoncé writes of exploring her roots and learning she's the descendant of slaves. That is evolution. That is revolution.

She describes how she fought to get her body back after her first child, and how with the twins she embraced her FUPA, her little baby stomach, and how her arms are bigger and she's embraced that, too. As a black woman, she is going to inspire people.

The only other time Beyoncé was on the cover of *Vogue*, there was no story inside.

She wanted to interview herself, and that was not allowed. And now *this* time, in 2018, she had full control of her story, suggesting the first black American photographer for the cover and writing her own narrative inside the issue. Beyoncé can do that because she's the most popular woman in the world. And she chooses to do that because...why? I suspect because she knows what all black people know: It's difficult to be a black woman or black man in this country.

We struggle to endure and overcome the centuries of ingrained white supremacy, the institutions of injustice and inequality, in every aspect of life in this, the great America.

I proudly wrote an op-ed for the Sunday edition of *The Washington Post* about the cultural significance of Beyoncé's cover. Upon its publication, I sent a link to Susan Plagemann, the publisher of *Vogue*. She was thrilled with the piece and sent it off to every major editor in the Condé Nast lineup, including Anna Wintour.

Not one of those editors wrote me about the piece. Not one quick e-mail from Anna Wintour.

Editors I've worked with for decades didn't understand the immense importance of this occasion simply because they are not capable of understanding. None of my contemporaries have seen the world through black eyes.

For so long I was the only person of color in the upper echelons of fashion journalism, but I was too busy pushing forward, making it to the next day, to really think about the responsibility that came with this role. Memories linger in the mind. Now I realize it is my duty to tell the story of how a black man survived and thrived in the chiffon trenches.

Although great strides have been made, I'm still very aware of my being black in this country. I'm aware that a black man still has to work one thousand times harder to live the American dream. I'm aware that every day when a black man wakes up in this country, no matter how successful or unsuccessful he is, his race will determine what he does and how far he goes in his life. No matter what you do, who you are, what career you choose, as a black man, you realize every day that our country was founded on the misguided rules and conceits of racism and slavery. A black man goes through life realizing, *There but for the grace of God go I.*

Racism moves under the epidermis as a constant, constant reality. It's part of the fabric of our existence.

“We are a blues culture,” according to Cornel West. We invent the blues every day when we wake up. *Good morning, heartache, I rise, yes I rise, thank God.* Hope lives.

You must wake up and create your own miracles every day. I went through my life on the strength of hope, and the memory of my ancestors, and the people who showed me unconditional love. There’s no sunny day, yet there is sunshine in my life. You have to hope. It’s a dangerous and perilous tightrope walk, and yet you must rise to meet the day.

We rejoice in Beyoncé and her blackness, in Tyler Mitchell and his blackness, and in all the generations behind them. I feel unspeakable joy for their landmark in history and for the future of fashion.

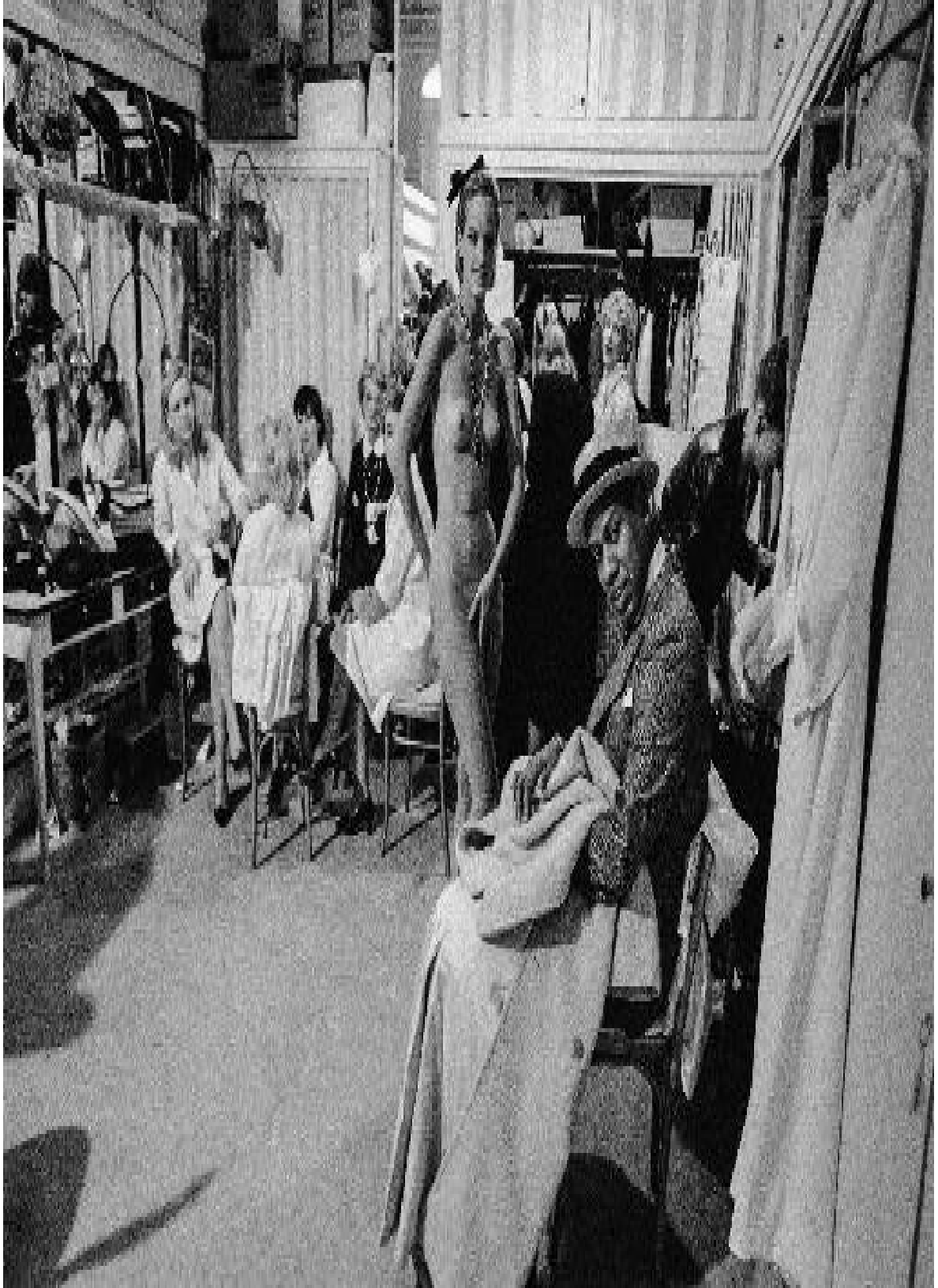
The power in knowledge cannot be understated. Whenever people ask me for advice, I tell them two things: Never give up on your dreams, and do your homework.

“Homework” can mean a lot of things, but do your homework in life. Style will get you up the steps into the revolving door; substance and knowledge will allow you access to create new horizons. My great depth of knowledge is the number one skill I possess and has carried me throughout my career to this day. Rivers deep, mountains high. All the people who mattered in my life have approached me because of my knowledge.

Throughout my career, designers liked spending time with me because I studied, and I studied, and I resolved to learn as much as I could.

The waters I sailed through were oftentimes tumultuous. But I also found kindness, and people who were similar to me, and it opened a range of possibilities for being.

I hope you find my glorious and, somehow, triumphant crawls through the chiffon trenches to be fierce and fearless. I am now in my seventies, but mentally I feel like I am twenty-nine. Physically, I am a huge galleon slowly sailing into harbor, broken from so many battles. But still, I rise, and continue to express myself with articulation, eloquence, and respect. I bow down to no one and find my way through the memory of what has been good in this life, which is not yet finished. My past gives me strength.



Photograph by Arthur Elgort

I was born in a now-torn-down hospital on the edge of tony, affluent Georgetown in Washington, D.C. Two months after my arrival, my parents, Alma and William Carroll Talley, took me to my grandmother's house in Durham, North Carolina, the center of the tobacco industry. My parents were young, and as was typical in Southern black households, it was decided I would live with my grandmother, Bennie Frances Davis, as my parents sought careers in the nation's capital. I called my grandmother Mama.

Mama and I lived with my great-grandmother China. Both widows, they coupled pension checks and my grandmother's salary from being a domestic maid at the men's campus of Duke University, as well as supplemental income from my parents, to make a house that operated on organization, faith, God, and maintenance. As a young child I was given duties: dusting, collecting coal for the stoves, and gathering kindling from the woodshed, as well as washing dishes after meals.

There was churchgoing, and there was churchgoing: Sunday school; vacation Bible school; homecoming celebrations; baptisms in the rain-filled concrete pool constructed just beyond the churchyard cemetery.

I went to Lyon Park elementary school, which was just down the street from our home. I had close family bonds and my favorite cousins were my best friends. Most of the time, I managed to avoid the cruel bullies at school and in the neighborhood. I do, however, remember vividly staying home from school on a rare snow day and proudly building a three-tiered snowman in our front yard, complete with coal eyes, a carrot nose, and coal lips. I went into the kitchen at lunchtime, where my great-grandmother China was heating up a can of Campbell's chicken noodle soup for me. By the time I put on my coat and returned outside, the neighborhood kids had destroyed my freshly constructed snowman. I turned around, went back inside, and sulked. What could I do?

My grandmother's mother couldn't come out and take up my defense, and I had no desire to chase down and confront the vandals.

Young people can be very mean. When I would get upset, my uncle Lewis used to say to me, "Just keep on getting up. Get up every day and just keep going." It was some of the best advice I've ever been given.

At an early age, I found my fantasy world in books and records, classical music, Nina Simone, Laura Nyro, Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross. In my aunt Myra's country house, I found a book on the disaster of the *Titanic*, the luxury ocean liner that was never supposed to sink. The wealthy and the middle-class went to their deaths in the cold seas. Every time I went to visit Aunt Myra, I picked up this book; it resonated as something in my mind's eye that was outside the norm of my everyday existence.

My favorite retreat was the city library in downtown Durham, North Carolina. By the age of twelve, I had read every magazine and book I had come across. My world became the glossy pages of *Vogue*, where I could read about Truman Capote's legendary ball, given at the Plaza, in honor of Katharine Graham. And Gloria Vanderbilt, in her patchwork antique quilts with Elizabethan ruffs, created by Adolfo. I loved seeing her photographed in her simple Mainbocher suits or the exotic Fortuny pleated gowns she kept folded in special coils, like snakes, to keep the silk vibrant. I dreamed of meeting Naomi Sims and Pat Cleveland, and living a life like the ones I saw in the pages of *Vogue*, where bad things never happened. Blue spring skies lent my grandmother's rosebushes a glorious color in our front yard. Summers were spent picking wild blackberries, watching cardinals zoom around our house, and having wonderful, delicious dinners, cooked all day and eaten at five-thirty. Food was our luxury—simple, good, home-cooked food. Every day, there were fresh-cooked homemade meals.

Sometimes we ate leftovers, but I remember Sundays, when hot, fresh beaten buttermilk biscuits; rows of crisp bacon; scrambled eggs; and preserves made our breakfast. Cake, pie, and a myriad of home-cooked desserts were my favorites.

Autumn brought with it crisp, crinkly golden leaves from the maple tree, a massive one in our front yard, its leaves awful to rake. In the winter, if it snowed, I had to gather extra buckets of glossy chunks of coal in the scuttle and store them on the back porch.

Great-Grandmother China died in January 1961, and I felt alone for the first time.

For a budding young man, this was overwhelming, the death scene of my great-grandmother, a lady who was the matriarch of a God-fearing and God-loving family.

The family gathered at Aunt Pete's, and she made enough food to feed everyone, including her seven daughters, one surviving son, and assorted extended family members. Throughout the night, into the morning, the adults were in the family room, sharing stories of growing up and of their beloved mama.

Somehow, there was an economy of words between my grandmother and me as we shared this humble, modest household, filled with nurturing love and the greatest values: treating others with kindness, and caring for your neighbors and family.

Life went on. My parents divorced when I was nine. Nobody told me about their separation, but I eventually figured it out. Both of them continued to visit