

RETAIL

Retail can be a portal for systemic change through inclusive, diverse marketplaces

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Berea broom craft student, Jocelyn Oats, braiding a broom. Image credit: GOODEE

By NORA HOWE

The retail industry can ignite systemic change by empowering people to produce and consume with positive social impact, according to participants in The [Fashion and Race Database](#) Conversation Series sponsored by Canadian department store [Holt Renfrew](#).

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During the first panel discussion of a three-part Web series, "Retail as a Portal: New Marketplaces for Systemic Change" moderated by professor and founder of The Fashion and Race Database Kimberly Jenkins, visionary leaders in the retail space discussed ways they are actively transforming retail into a more diverse and inclusive sector. The series' title sponsor Holt Renfrew aligns with the Fashion and Race Database's commitment to diversity through its "H Project" which carries a mandate of connecting consumers, causes and communities to inspire a new generation of purposeful luxury and drive positive change in the world.

"The future of luxury and fashion really has to be about companies and brands that put design as a core to their intention, but also put sustainability, impact and ethical thinking central to their plans," said Dexter Peart, cofounder of [GOODEE](#). "It's not about sustainability only or design only it's really a mix of craftsmanship and thoughtfulness and tying those values into how a business impacts people."

Designing new marketplaces

The series began last month and enlisted emerging leaders in the retail space from diverse communities.

GOODEE is a community of socially-conscious design enthusiasts who prioritize caring for people and the planet before all else. As a leading curated marketplace offering essential homeware and lifestyle products, it serves as a platform for responsible brands and artisans producing timeless objects.

Founded on the idea that conscious commerce has the power to transform the world, GOODEE seeks to empower both creators and consumers to create change by championing community, transparency and sustainability.

"Very early on, we knew we wanted GOODEE to be a platform to tell stories about good people doing good things," Mr. Dexter Peart said. "So, quite simply, at its core, our company's mission is good people, good design and good

impact.

"We provide a platform for people who may not have otherwise had the opportunity to share their voices people trying to move conversations, creativity and communities forward," he said.



Weaving at Ethical Fashion Initiative cooperative in Burkina Faso. Image credit: GOODEE

Skwalwen is an Indigenous business creating small batch botanical skincare products.

Honoring traditional Squamish plant knowledge, the company incorporates wild harvested plants and organic, high quality ingredients into its products. Sustainably and respectfully harvested, each product carries a Squamish name to honor the place where the ingredients and knowledge originate.

"I have built into the foundation of my business a responsibility to do it in an ethical way," said Leigh Joseph, ancestral name Styawat, ethnobotanist and founder of Skwalwen. "A way that gives back and a way that considers how to share this context."

Through Skwalwen, Ms. Joseph has found a meaningful path to communicating her core values as well as building collaborations that will guide her business in the direction of positive and responsible retail.



Founder of Skwalwen Leigh Joseph. Image credit: Skwalwen

Carving out spaces and platforms dedicated to the amplification of BIPOC voices, or Black, Indigenous and people of color, should be a top priority for retailers, according to all three panelists. In terms of creating opportunity or access, it is not about handouts or charity, but rather creating meaningful connections so that consumers see things they would not have otherwise seen.

"There are so many challenges for BIPOC communities that build on top of each other," said Byron Peart, cofounder of GOODEE. "While there are many statements and levels of engagement, one of the real differences is truly giving people opportunities and access to building a network.

"It's incumbent upon us to continually create a network for others," he said. "Without empathy and a willingness to collaborate, there is a breakdown in the full potential of the moment we are in right now."

Diversifying fashion

In a panel at the *Financial Times* Business of Luxury Summit in November, Ms. Jenkins expressed that the most pressing issue in the present workplace is diversity in staffing.

In order for companies to successfully incorporate diversity into their workplaces, they must acknowledge the

challenges built into the existing framework that have disproportionately disadvantaged marginalized groups, she suggested. Companies must be willing to made accommodations and reorganize the cultural structure of their organization for more diverse and inclusive environments ([see story](#)).

In September, the Council of Fashion Designers of America, looking to address systemic racism and racial inequity in fashion, expanded its programming to create opportunities for Black talent. The CFDA has created a separate Black advisory board responsible for all CFDA efforts on inclusivity, diversity and equality.

Bonnie Morrison joined the CFDA in a newly created role to lead the strategy and execution of CFDA equity program initiatives with the goal of building opportunities for Black creatives and professionals in fashion and will help support and execute new initiatives such as the talent placement program created for Black creatives and professionals in the U.S. fashion industry ([see story](#)).

"Retailers need to be more curious about what they put in front of people," Mr. Dexter Peart said. "We are what we see, so if we put more black, indigenous and people of color and their creativity forward, then people will become more diverse in what they see.

"We need to get to that next step where these things become visually coherent and consistent with how we live our lives," he said.

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