Super Style at Supercenters: The Democratization of High-End Fashion Designers’ Names Through Big Box Garments, 2003-2010

Jessamyn Carter Modrak

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Introduction

The Rise of the Big Box Store

Before the late nineteenth century, specialty stores sold specific products, lacking the variety of goods found in both modern department stores and big box stores. Department stores developed between 1850 and 1890 in part due to urbanization. What once was the country store turned into the general store and eventually into the downtown department store. The modern department store offered a wide range of products under one roof, simple prices with no debate about value, truthfulness about goods, the ability to buy on credit and return items, and little pressure to purchase anything. At the time, the volume of merchandise a department store could carry was immense compared to specialized retail stores. Departments were necessary in these stores to help keep the products organized and make the space navigable for consumers, as well as allow managers to easily oversee how quickly goods sold and what price points were most profitable. Because both rich and poor could enter, department stores became cultural compasses for those aspiring to enter into higher social classes while dictating fashionable and appropriate attire for those already in the upper echelons.\(^1\) While there were specialty department stores that were exclusive and glamorous, most department stores took the role of “moral authority” in American commerce, guiding consumers as to which garments and household items were most desirable.\(^2\)

The past several decades have shown a shift in consumer shopping habits, transitioning from department stores to big box stores. *Stores* magazine prints an annual listing of the top 100 retailers in America. On the 2010 list Wal-Mart holds the number one spot with $304.9 billion in sales, which is almost four times as much as Kroger
stores, second on the list, with $76.7 billion in sales. Other big box stores Target, The Home Depot, Costco, Lowe's, and Best Buy are in the top ten. Twenty-five percent of the list is comprised of big box stores, with only Sears, Macy's, J.C. Penney, Nordstrom, and Neiman Marcus representing traditional department stores. In comparison, department stores J.C. Penney and May's were in the top ten list of retailers in 1994. Only Wal-Mart and Kmart represented big box stores in the top ten list that year as well. In 1990 Wal-Mart had 9 Supercenters. By 2000 there were 888; by 2006, 1,906. These numbers show that the presence of big box stores in the market is more than just a mere trend. The big box store has become the latest evolution in retail. The conclusion of The Retail Revolution: Market Transformation, Investment, and Labor in the Modern Department Store clearly presents this change. The authors say,

“One should recall that the development of the department store was itself a consolidation, bringing together in one place and under one management merchandise previously available only through unrelated specialty shops. The emergence of the discount store in the 1950's further restructured the industry by undercutting department store prices and forcing the more established retailing modes to cut costs or to compete on a basis other than price. The rise of the chain store, both full-price and discount, permitted the large firms to exploit tremendous economies of scale, and in so doing to grow even larger. In turn, these large chains became incorporated, developed a sophisticated management style, and left behind the trappings and attitudes of the small, provincial businesses from which they sprang.”

The most iconic big box store in the world, Wal-Mart, is typically viewed with a love-it-or-hate-it attitude (see fig. I.1). Regardless of opinion, Wal-Mart has changed the marketplace and the way goods are manufactured and packaged. Sam Walton founded Wal-Mart by being a saavy retailer and businessman. In 1962, Walton opened his first Wal-Mart store after years of retail experience owning and operating Ben Franklin Five and Dime stores. Walton sought to fill the gap in retail by focusing on previously ignored
consumers in rural towns. Rural consumers were used to small independently owned shops that were expensive and limited in the goods they offered. Furthermore, Walton realized that people would not mind a bare-bones approach to shopping if it meant discounts. He created deals with suppliers to buy in bulk and lower costs. He did not spend money on advertising campaigns and used his own truck drivers instead of costly union drivers. By utilizing computers, Walton was able to analyze his inventories and sales electronically.

In the second half of the 20th century Americans witnessed the suburbanization of housing and retail. People wanted to shop where they lived, and they wanted to purchase goods without the high urban prices. Wal-Mart had become a symbol of this change. Some people liked this change, and others claimed the retailer was ruining local business. Even though jobs were created in building the store and hiring employees, it was also argued that most of the money made did not stay in the town. These arguments are still relevant today in 2010 when critics and supporters debate Wal-Mart's impact on American economics.

Target is also one of the biggest names in the big box realm, and its claim to fame in the past decade has been its ability to attract more affluent patrons at its stores by using a variety of smart marketing and retailing techniques, including licensing agreements with famous designers (see fig. I.2). George Draper Dayton founded Dayton's Department Stores in Minnesota; in 1962 his grandsons created Target. The company partnered with J.L. Hudson Company to become Dayton Hudson later in the decade to create more stores. The Target Corporation did not come about until 2000 when the company realized that its big box Target stores were booming.
There are many differences between Target and Wal-Mart. Target stores originally stemmed from urban centers rather than dominating small towns, which has helped attract a more cosmopolitan clientele. Its executives have also decided not to be a major grocery supplier, allowing the company to focus on the sort of goods it originally set out to sell, like clothes and electronics. Target has also developed an exceptional logo and catchy ad campaigns. Target's consumer on average is a 44-year-old woman earning approximately $50,000 per year, which is well above the poverty line. By selling major brand names, such as Sony, Calphalon, and Todd Oldham, people realize they can get high-quality goods found in department stores for less at Target. As one of the first big box stores to create exclusive licensing agreements with renowned designers, such as Michael Graves, the company stands apart from the rest of its competitors. In an interview with Cynthia Rowley, the famed designer explains, “I wanted to do home products. The best way to do it was with one retailer that could oversee a whole lifestyle brand. Target is known for the marketing and merchandising, to be able to house it all together under one roof is really the ideal situation.” This makes designing easy for the designer and affordable for the consumer. She continues that Target allowed her access to a new audience, but she cautions, “I think fashion is a different audience.”

The False Notion of Democratizing Design

The phrase “democratizing design” gets thrown around by critics and analysts when discussing the emergence of high-end designers' goods at big box stores. But what makes design democratic? In order to determine this, the definition of democratizing and the definition of design need to be established. Dictionary.com states that “democratize” means to make democratic: to be of or for the people in general. It also states that
design is defined as an outline, sketch, or plan, as of the form and structure of a work of art to be executed or constructed; organization or structure of formal elements in a work of art; the combination of details or features. In design the combination of details and organization or structure of elements includes the material, stitching, and accoutrements that make up a garment. By this definition, big box designs are not democratizing high-end designs, because big box garments are not made of the same materials as high-end garments, nor are the same production methods used. If the high-end plan for a garment is the same as a plan for a big box garment, then democratization may be applicable only if the materials and production methods are not specified in the high-end design plan. The plan in this sense must be an image or an idea. Thus, the image of a high-end garment may be democratized or accessed through a big box version by means of similar style. In my research, however, similar style between high-end garments and big box garments is not always present. It is never guaranteed that a designer will base their big box line on their expensive line. This thesis will show that high-end designers' fashion lines at big box stores democratize the designers' names rather than their high-end designs.

If the styles produced by high-end designers are not exclusive anymore, meaning they can be found both in couture and big box lines, then what remains exclusive is the designer's name. By creating contracts between one store and one fashion designer, designers and stores alike can retain some sense of caché, because consumers can only go to their venue to find that particular designer's secondary line. In order to achieve a certain level of desire by consumers at the big box mass market level, it helps to have been successful in the high-end fashion world first. This success creates the sense that the designer is legitimate, because they have already proven their ability to design and
construct high quality garments, and because critics deem high-end garments socially relevant. The designer's name becomes desirable at the big box level because it's been out of reach to the masses for so long. Big box garments designed by high-end designers give access to a designer's label, but not to their high-end fashion. In the end, what is produced for the big box line is not of the same quality and does not necessarily contain the same level of detail as garments from a high-end line.

Steve Change expresses his doubts about Vera Wang's Kohl's line in a 2006 article in Brandweek. In his article he talks about “brand conflict, as the high-culture trappings of Vera Wang may be inconsistent with the brand image of Kohl's.” In a certain sense, this may be true of any high-end designer who designs a big box line. Change continues that Wang's reputation may be harmed because her propensity for producing luxury items, even when licensed, may be “incongruous with Kohl's proposition of everyday brands.” Michael Stone, CEO of The Beanstalk Group, feels differently. He says, “It has become apparent that a designer can bring [his or her] line downstairs without negatively impacting the integrity, authenticity, and credibility of the upstairs brand.” I argue that Stone is correct, and the reason is simple: The garments for high-end fashion lines and big box lines are not the same, because a couture silk satin wedding gown by Vera Wang is not the same as a polyester top at Kohl's. Because of this discrepancy, the fashionistas can still feel luxurious in their high-end Wang gown and big box consumers can feel happy knowing they are wearing something with Wang's name on it. If everyone could afford to wear a silk satin gown, then a silk satin gown would never be special.

In the early 1900s, America lacked a solid grounding in original modern design
and looked to Europe for guidance. Department stores were able to create copies of French fashions proudly made in America. Today this is the opposite. At big box stores Americans seek high-end American designers’ goods made outside of the United States for affordability. Americans hear the word “democratize” and think of a concept involving all things good. Yet designers and big box stores alike generate hefty profits from their agreements with each other. There is little to say these two entities are intentionally trying to benefit consumers. However, consumers are unintentionally benefiting from these agreements between store and designer because of the postmodern context: The acceptance of high and low culture allows designers to maintain their high-end status while branching into lower-end venues. The acceptance and desire for obsolescence allows for goods to be manufactured cheaply and lacking the same quality as high-end goods without punishment from consumers. A lack of overwhelming nationalism and acceptance of globalization allows for freedom in design and production techniques whereby items do not have to be American-made to be deemed acceptable. Finally, the plurality of identities in the postmodern context gives designers the freedom to create different lines for varying budgets and different people.

Isaac Mizrahi, Vera Wang, and Norma Kamali are all fashion designers who fit into this new phase of design distribution despite critical pessimism about the risks each is taking toward dissolving their high-end legacy. Each chapter in this thesis devoted to their careers and eventual interests in the big box realm shows a history that has included risk: Wang has already shifted from a complete luxury line with her incredible propensity for licensing her name; Kamali took a chance on her own stores and has remained low-key throughout her career; and Mizrahi has created the brand marketing of his personality
versus only his fashion designs. What it comes down to is a totality of the designers' images in relation to the garments they produce. The big box store is another venue for business recognition while giving consumers the names they want without the same exceptional design.
Chapter 1
Isaac Mizrahi

“You have to love to [create things] more than selling them. You have to leave the selling of them to someone else.”

The 1995 documentary Unzipped presents a glimpse of the often dramatic creative processes of contemporary fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi (see fig. 1.1). At the start of the film Mizrahi, depressed by the reviews of his latest runway show, is forced to re-invent himself as a designer. With his ego intact, viewers see him hobnob with such famous people as Sandra Bernhard, Cindy Crawford, and Naomi Campbell. He easily engages in conversation with Eartha Kitt about commissioning pieces she wants him to design. You can’t help but wonder if this is really the man who designed fourteen-dollar shoes for Target. Yet you also come away from the film with an understanding of how someone like Mizrahi can successfully woo both the upper echelon of the fashion world and the everyday woman. While some contemporary designers remain true solely to their couture background, Mizrahi was one of the first to break new ground by dominating both the luxury and mass-produced big box markets with his clothes and accessories by creating a brand image focusing on his design personality.

So much of Mizrahi’s success stems from his desire to create practical yet stylish clothing for all women and having the necessary design background to do so. In the introduction to the book Celebrity Scarves, Mizrahi tells a story about how he learned to knit from his aunt Norma. He says he started to design at the age of 13 and first created a crewneck sweater with intentionally long arms to deviate from the norm. Yet no one understood his “avant-garde” perspective at the time. Mizrahi claims to love scarves, identifying them as both comforting and interesting. The book was published in 2003, the
year Mizrahi signed with Target to do an affordable line of clothing for the major retailer. Mizrahi says, “Now anything goes…and the scarf you choose really reflects who you are.”

His knitting days were just the beginning of his career. Thirteen was also the year he received his first sewing machine. Says Mizrahi, “Those early years are so important. That’s when you form your taste.” He also says that he feels he’s doing the same thing he did as a child, though initially he felt more like an outsider then: “I wasn’t understood…but then I went to performing arts high school, where everyone was a crazy actor or singer or dancer…It was wonderful to be accepted.”

During his childhood in Brooklyn, New York, Mizrahi’s mother enjoyed wearing major couture designers like Balenciaga, while his father was a children’s wear manufacturer. Isaac worked in the fashion world for 6 years before creating his own company at the age of 26. After attending Parsons School for Design, he went on to work for Perry Ellis, Jeffrey Banks, and Calvin Klein. This background in sportswear gave Mizrahi the ultimate training for creating his own designs emphasizing style and function. During this time and later as he developed his own couture line, he became familiar with big-name clients like Liza Minnelli and did costume designs for Spike Lee’s movie Jungle Fever and Twyla Tharp’s ballet Brief Fling.

Mizrahi received high marks from critics from the very start of his career. In 1987 he cashed out a $50,000 trust fund, and with an additional $50,000 from his business partner Sarah Haddad Cheney, created his own firm. A year later he was backed by Haim Dabah, owner of Gitabo sportswear, and Jack Dushey, giving him the financial stability to stay in business. In the fall of 1988 he was dubbed “this year’s hottest new
designer” by numerous fashion magazines. In 1989 he received the Council of Fashion Designers of America Perry Ellis Award for best new designer and in 1990 received the honor of best women’s wear designer. On working at Perry Ellis, Mizrahi says, “It was all so very American. He (Ellis) surrounded himself with the most beautiful flowers, objects, papers…It wasn’t just clothes.” Mizrahi adopted this aesthetic of vibrancy and beauty in his own designs. His 1988 collection featured striking colors like “blood orange, sunflower yellow, and fuschia.” Furthermore, his clothes in his early couture line were made of only the finest materials, such as cashmere, camel hair, and silk, and sold at high-end stores such as Bergdorf Goodman, Marshall Fields, and Nordstrom.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art is home to one of Mizrahi's women's blazers produced in 1990 (see fig. 1.2). Made of white and black linen, the blazer is an example of Mizrahi's functional, yet fun, design. The black linen open collar makes the garment appropriate for professional events while the oversized black linen spirals would make the woman wearing this blazer stand out in a crowd. A single black button in the center of the waist helps close the blazer in more formal environments. Six panels of silk fabric on the interior help make the garment form fitting and luxurious (see fig. 1.3). While the stitching is tight and strong, the only aspect that detracts from the garment is how the pattern of the fabric on the back of the blazer does not match up at the center seam. “ISAAC MIZRAHI” in bold, black lettering stands out on the label at the back of the interior neckline (see fig. 1.4).

Mizrahi lives and breathes design. This passion is evident in Unzipped. In a later interview Mizrahi explains his design process in his own words. He says, “I get inspired somehow, somewhere. I get this gesture in my head and think ‘is this worthy of doing a
whole collection?" Usually it is because it's the only thing I can think of. And from there I do all these millions of sketches based on this one gesture." He explains further in the introduction of his book, How to Have Style, that this inspiration comes from everywhere: “The color of a flower. The shape of a butterfly's wing. The juxtaposition of an old tenement building next to a shiny new skyscraper. Disparate images that somehow come together and show me how to think. It's as if the ideas enter my brain and come out of my eyes and hands as sketches and ideas.” He also says, “No matter what I do (hosting television shows, fashion design, etc.) I find myself sketching things crazily at three in the morning having these design storms.”

Mizrahi reveled in his couture fame during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Much of this time was spent fine-tuning his design aesthetic, which readily appealed to the high-end lifestyle of his famous and wealthy clients. He had his work space fitted for his upscale needs. Anderson/Schwartz Architects created a neutral color scheme featuring natural wood panels. The space had to be ready for fashion magazine interviews and elite clients. Lots of windows and light were added, a luxury in Manhattan. Even the fitting room was placed next to the elevator for the convenience of high-profile visitors.

He had a definite opinion of what his work should entail and the type of woman who should wear his garments. In an article in the March/April edition of American Photo in 1991 Mizrahi’s look emphasized youth and urbanity, a mixture of “innocence and sophistication.” He preferred outstanding color and simplicity. He says, “I love the emotionality and movement…It’s about more than fabric, color, or shape.” For the December 1994 Vogue Mizrahi created a “mini-collection” that emphasized his functional aesthetic, featuring “a full length slip dress, a narrow suit, a trench coat, a
knee-length strapless dress, and separates like a gold spandex t-shirt.”

Mizrahi wanted a glam look featuring chic gold lame that patrons could associate with wealth.

By the mid-1990s Mizrahi’s outlook had changed. Mizrahi claims he envisioned a more affordable line first in 1993. He said at the time, “I looked at that spring collection, and I thought, ‘It would be perfect if it was less expensive.’” Thus his less expensive line of clothes known as “Isaac” was created in 1995, eight years prior to his Target collection. When envisioning the busy single woman, Mizrahi comments on there being a “design problem” in the fashion field, and it’s just the problem he sought to resolve. Discussing his denim wrap dress for the Isaac collection, Mizrahi says, “Come on. It’s $150 and you throw it in the washing machine.” This “secondary” line featured new and improved accessory designs, which Mizrahi deemed a “new category called basic luxury...It means essential.” A plaid cotton trench coat cost only $272 while suede ballet flats were $172. Always interested in color, Mizrahi used lime green for a sweater and fuchsia for a coat. Yet these goods were not available on such a massive scale as Target would provide, as Mizrahi remained adamant about selling them only in such stores as Bergdorf Goodman, Neiman Marcus, and Bloomingdale’s.

Always looking to capitalize on a situation, Mizrahi said, “Maybe because this new line [Isaac] has a chance of reaching far, I feel more justified in doing something more special for the expensive line.”

It’s hard to believe Mizrahi when he claims, “My priority is not to make money.” He has put himself in the public eye in many ways during his career by being a famous high-end designer, having his own television show, having a documentary made about him, creating a comic book, working with Broadway, and making various guest
appearances on television fashion shows. Jennifer Peck Bartlett, president of his fashion company, said in 1995, “We’re promoting him as the next American brand…It’s American fashion as entertainment.” If anything, Mizrahi is an incredible designer because he is multifaceted. Even though Mizrahi ceased making clothes in the late 1990s, the film “Unzipped” and his television show on the Oxygen network helped boost his image and name recognition so that Mizrahi had never completely faded away when he sought to expand his client base by signing with Target in 2003. Known in the 1990s primarily by an elite and close-knit group of followers including fashionistas, peers, press, and social butterflies, he could sell to the masses now that he was well-established and highly publicized. Mizrahi has marketed himself as a whole piece, working with both the high and low ends of fashion consumerism. With his outstanding personality, you are not just buying a handbag from Mizrahi, you are buying a piece of him. After the debut of Unzipped Mizrahi said, “(The movie) is helping people to know my name and what I believe in and what I stand for. Plus, it's just opened doors for me. I'm getting so much interest – not just in the clothes but in me.” With his new deal with Target, Mizrahi said, “It's kind of like my reentry back into fashion. I haven't been making clothes for a number of years, and I somehow did a lot of soul searching and decided that all those years of saying I was making clothes for the American woman and her not really being able to afford them, you know, and it's time.” Perhaps more honestly, Mizrahi also says, “The Target thing for me works as an image. It enhances my image is what I think.”

Mizrahi describes the phenomenon of a couture designer working with a major retailer as “high-profile low-fashion.” He says that his Target line was an attempt to “redefine luxury” as his clothes and accessories are “simple, wearable, refreshingly
In an interview on CNN's program The Biz, anchor Susan Lisovicz uses the term “affordable luxury” to categorize Mizrahi's Target designs. Mizrahi responds, “When you think about clothes that are sort of accessible to everyone, the idea of luxury changes a lot. So it's not exactly like furs and jewels and things. It's just really fantastic clothes that you need every single day to solve problems as a woman.”49 In a sense, Mizrahi's big box line helps redefine luxury, whereby luxury is not necessarily in the materials but in the usage of the garments.

Mizrahi also wanted to maintain certain design standards at Target for his line there. Used to dealing with the manufacturers directly, Mizrahi says, “That's what was great about working with Target, because we didn't know that much about outsourcing. We'd say, 'No, this is not good enough. Do it again.' We really did force these people to make really good clothes.”50 Working with Target also relieved Mizrahi from some of the business stresses of being a designer. He says, “I feel like I'm in very good hands. I don't have to worry about personnel and running a sample room and showing up for every single, you know, opening of a light.”51 Mizrahi was able to do the creative designing for his Target garments. Even though Target asked him to create certain things, like a denim pencil skirt, for example, Mizrahi was still able to provide the artistic vision for that skirt.52

Furthermore, Target was happy to jump on the high/low bandwagon. John Remington, vice president of events marketing and communications for Target when Mizrahi's line debuted, said at the time, “Target recognizes that modern dressing is all about mixing both ends of the fashion spectrum.”53
dedicated and excited he was to design the line. Mizrahi went above and beyond simple sketched ideas and created samples of garments he wanted to see in the line and then created a fashion show complete with professional models for Target executives.\textsuperscript{54}

*Vogue* devoted an article in 2005 to the practice of mixing and matching high and low goods. Derek Lam says, “The amazing thing about fashion these days is that great fashion is not driven by cost. It’s found everywhere.” The essay argues that now more than ever has haute couture mingled with the mass produced. It provides several examples of this with Mizrahi. For instance, *Vogue* paired up a sequined skirt of Mizrahi’s that retails for $13,000 with a $40 coat from his Target line. Mizrahi says, “I never have to charge $300 for a t-shirt again. It just feels wrong to do it.”\textsuperscript{55}

Moreover, Mizrahi seemed in good spirits about this new chapter of his career as he states, “I’m having a lot of fun doing what I always do, just less expensively.”\textsuperscript{56} His goods at Target were initially set to be priced between $9.99 and $69.99. Yet Mizrahi was not the only designer to follow this trend at the beginning. Eric Wilson, an editor for Women’s Wear Daily, said in 2003, “There’s this whole movement in bringing trends down to a mass level. They’re generally unattainable to the majority of the country.”\textsuperscript{57} There are examples of Michael Kors’ products in one *Vogue* article that include an $11,000 python coat with a $179 jersey dress and a Calvin Klein white leather coat for $3,785 and a tank top for $19.\textsuperscript{58}

One blazer by Mizrahi for Target from 2005 retains the designer's playfulness, but lacks the opulent feel of the garment at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Originally retailing for $34.99 and the color of “shredded wheat,” the blazer for Target is a bit drab (see fig. 1.5). What makes it stand out, if at all, is the vibrant neon hues of the lining that
goes around the front trim of the blazer up to the collar and around the pockets. At the top of the neck and upper back of the interior is a larger portion of the striped pattern. However, the blazer for Target does have two frontal pockets and three button closures, as well as four button closures around the base of the sleeve to alter the formality of the garment. Yet the fabric feels stiff and harsh compared to the linen of the high-end blazer. The one for Target contains cotton lining for the interior of the shell and polyester for the interior of the sleeves, and the body of the jacket is made of 65% polyester and 35% cotton (see fig. 1.6). The pieces of lining used for the high-end blazer look curved, so as to fit around the body of a woman. In contrast, the pieces used for the Target blazer are straighter. While machine sewing on the Target blazer gives the garment a sturdy feel, the cut ends of the thread used for stitching the buttons and holes are apparent. This detail and the crumpled look of the fabric in the interior give the blazer a slightly sloppy feel. The high-end blazer does look worn on the interior, but its lining still looks relatively uncreased. Unlike the simple label on the expensive blazer, the Isaac Mizrahi for Target is square in shape, and is brightly colored with a yellow border and fuschia and orange squares in the middle. In white thread over this square is ISAAC MIZRAHI in large print and FOR TARGET in smaller print below. The size label with MADE IN CHINA is attached to the bottom of the main label (see fig. 1.7).

In true Mizrahi fashion, to get the word out about his new Target line, some interesting and daring advertising tactics were taken as his clothes and accessories were expected to reach 1,191 stores in the United States. One of the most notable includes a disposable shop temporarily set up at Rockefeller center. This was important, because at the time there were no Target stores located in New York City. To set his clothes apart,
the walls and flooring were a stark white. Mizrahi certainly grabbed the attention of critics as the *New York Times* wrote, “Pointy-toe tennis shoes and black wool berets are among the handful of saucy touches in an aggressively un-intimidating line.” While Mizrahi was most well known for the clothes and dresses in his couture lines, he also emphasized “women’s…handbags, shoes, sunglasses, and jewelry” for his Target collection to accentuate an entire packaged look.

Also daring was Target's “High/Low” New York City runway show displaying both the designer's garments for Target and for upscale department store Bergdorf Goodman. Viewers had a difficult time distinguishing the less expensive items from the more luxurious from their seats. The real discrepancy was in the prices, which ranged from thousands of dollars to $25. While the show was held at the posh Cipriani 42nd Street in Manhattan and garnered the attention of fashion editors and celebrities alike, Mizrahi declared that the majority of the garments in the show were from the Target line. Mizrahi said, “That's one thing about the Target people, they won't let me show something different than it will appear in the store.”

Bergdorf Goodman was not enthusiastic about Mizrahi's line for them being shown concurrently with the Target collection. John Remington, vice president of events and marketing at Target, said of the show, “It's the 'expect more' side of the equation. Even the customers who can afford Isaac's custom designs are going to come into Target and buy the purse that goes with the $5,000 dress.” However, everyone goes to the big box store to shop, but not everyone can afford the upscale department store or boutique. Since Mizrahi's high-end and low-end garments were so indistinguishable, this may have been the source of concern for Bergdorf Goodman's representatives.
Mizrahi says that he “bores easily” and needs many projects to stay stimulated, hence his media presence, which, in his opinion, has strengthened his brand image. However, Mizrahi makes the bold statement that, “All the media I did does not equal one tenth of the ad campaign Target did to launch the collection.”

One display ad from a 2003 *New York Times* shows Mizrahi arm-in-arm with three fun-loving women (see fig. 1.8). Two are younger, and one is middle-aged, yet they are all dressed well and having a great time. At the bottom in small print it reads “Isaac Mizrahi at Target.” It seems as if Mizrahi needed no introduction at the time, and that most people would realize it was him in the middle without having to brazenly splash his name across the center of the page. At the top right of the page the clothing items the women are wearing are listed along with their prices. A black corduroy jacket goes for $27.99 while shoes range from $14.99 to $34.99.

To gain publicity for himself while still promoting his Target line, Mizrahi took on an endeavor humorous to Washington, D.C. natives whereby he designed blue denim aprons for conservators at the National Portrait Gallery and The Smithsonian American Art Museum. The interviewer asked him, “Was it harder to design clothing items for the Smithsonian than, say, a rhinestone collar for Target?” While his response does not answer the interviewer's question, he says, “Lab coats can be so constraining…I thought a little apron would do the trick. I love blue denim because it democratizes everything. And one size really does fit all.”

It is important that Mizrahi chose the word democratize here. I would agree that denim is a democratizing fabric, because it is available to most Americans in some fashion. The wash or construction of the denim for jeans or jackets in part determines its
price. Credit should be given to Mizrahi for creating an iconic blue jean jacket in his Target line. Yet going back to the blazer comparison, it is evident that Mizrahi's high-end silk-lined linen garments are not being democratized through the Target line. Instead of linen, the Target garment was constructed of cotton and polyester. While an apron may fit everyone, clothes do not function the same way. A couture Mizrahi garment does not fit the same way as a garment from Target. In-house seamstresses create the desired fit for someone who purchases a couture Mizrahi piece. At Target, customers must try on different sizes of a garment to see which one fits best, but not necessarily perfectly. Mizrahi may want people to associate his name with affordable high-end design by talking about democratizing garments, but the reality remains that many of the materials and construction methods used in his expensive lines were not always being used in his Target line. Mizrahi's name was being democratized more at Target rather than his expensive couture clothing.

Regardless, the jump to Target proved worthwhile for Mizrahi, but it was only one of several ventures for the designer. In 2005 Mizrahi said, “I am now trying to integrate everything. There is the television show; the collection for Bergdorf's, which I am trying to grow, and the collection for Target. There are other licenses coming that I can't mention, but they will round out the collection.” While Mizrahi’s Target line was thriving, the designer was simultaneously excelling in the couture market with his To Order line, which contained garments that cost between $8,000 and $50,000, and his Semi Couture line, which was priced between $1,200 and $7,500. Also in 2005, Mizrahi was invited to head the upscale firm of Hubert Givenchy, but at the time passed on the opportunity because he was so busy making a steady income with all of his
In 2008 Mizrahi finally made the decision to leave Target and take the position of creative director for Liz Claiborne, which started in January of 2009, after his goods at Target made $300 million in profits every year. Having already commandeered the New York runways as well as the “cheap-chic” designs for Target, Mizrahi decided to move to Liz Claiborne to revolutionize the middle ground of fashion that has been defunct for the past decade. Feeling that he had conquered both the high- and low-end markets of fashion design, his work at Liz Claiborne would be a new challenge based upon a middle price point and design. In 2008 he said, “Now they are begging for fashion at Target. If they ask me for one more short jacket, I’m going to hurl.” Mizrahi also cites the downturn in the economy as a chance to boost Liz Claiborne’s appeal. He feels that shoppers at Target buy clothes casually, if not haphazardly, whereas when someone shops at Macy’s they are going for a specific clothes-related purpose. By designing clothes for a mid-level clientele, much like the line Isaac was intended to serve, he can provide better quality products that are more highly valued and used in a tighter economy. Mizrahi said at the time he believed shoppers didn't have to just go to Target anymore for a good deal on fashion.

Mizrahi's book, How to Have Style, was published that same year, and reflects a contradictory shift in Mizrahi's attitude toward high/low designs. The book is intended to motivate women to love themselves and find their own fashionable look. Mizrahi's guidance transforms women of varying sizes by aligning their clothes with their personalities. He says, “I'm not going to try to convince you to change yourself. I'm not one of those intolerant people who thinks that unless everyone wears my designs, or
unless everyone spends most of their day getting dressed, they look awful.” While he places many of the women in garments from his Target line, most notably sweaters, shoes, and tote bags, he mostly encourages them to buy higher-end items. In contrast to big box clothes, he says, “Buying better quality clothes and workhorse accessories may cost more money, but they will last for years.” He advocates going to designer boutiques and trying on clothes there to find out your size and then going online to Ebay and purchasing those designer goods for less. While Mizrahi does mention big box stores like Target, H&M, and Loehmann's in his favorite places section, Mizrahi comes across as favoring the chic boutiques and rare finds rather than having the women dress solely in affordable garments.

Spend an hour at Mizrahi's expensive boutique on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and the aura is more exclusive and luxurious than any Target (see fig. 1.9). One sales representative informed me that they “go with the best of the best” as far as materials and manufacturers are concerned, using Italian fabrics and production facilities located ten blocks away from Mizrahi's main office in Manhattan for quality control. Producing garments for Target is different. In contrast, Lena Klofstad, a Target spokeswoman says, “(Target) has standards…and a compliance area that takes care to enforce them.” Mizrahi, on the other hand, when asked who physically produced his Target goods said, “I don’t know. And I don’t want to know.”

Upon reflection Mizrahi says of his career, “I do think design is much more important than selling things. I finally have a shop where I sell my expensive clothes. I'm finally letting go enough to create a business out of that. But even when I made clothes for Target it wasn't just about selling clothes. The design of something, the make of
something, the integrity that you imbue something is way more important than can be judged by how many or how few you sell of them.” Just because something sells well does not make it good design, rather it simply makes it popular design. Mizrahi would most likely argue that his line for Target reflects that good design can also be popular when it is affordable. The fact remains that touching a $2,000 short-waisted satin white jacket with an exuberant floral decoration popping out from the side by Mizrahi at his boutique is more exciting than sifting through racks at Target with everyone else around. Yet, one sales representative at his store explained that in 2010 people still walk in to the store disappointed that his Target designs are not there.
Chapter 2
Vera Wang

“This is what I was meant to do. I was born for this. Pictures are fun and great, but this is product. I have always loved product. You've got to love product.”

On September 14, 2007, Oprah Winfrey featured Vera Wang and the designer's new line for Kohl's stores, aptly titled Simply Vera Vera Wang, on her daytime television show. While Oprah tells her audience that Wang is renowned for creating expensive wedding dresses, she indicates that times are changing. Oprah says, “Today is very different. Vera's been busy with her latest brainchild. It's new [and] affordable.” While some critics expressed concern that a big box line would harm Wang's couture reputation, the designer was willing to expand her prolific licensing empire once again with an agreement with Kohl's. A departure from the high-end luxury stores Wang has been known to associate herself with, the designer hoped that pairing with one of America's largest mainstream big box stores would be a profitable venture to support her couture lines. Three years later, her Kohl's line has paid off for the store, designer, and consumers as well, although Wang has had to get used to the creative process of working within the big box realm.

Wang's childhood provided the designer with extraordinary experiences that framed her success in fashion. Her parents, Cheng Ching and Florence Wang, fled communist China and raised their family in the wealthy Upper East Side of Manhattan. Many family vacations to Europe exposed Vera to fashion and culture outside of the United States. Vera and her mother would go on couture shopping sprees in Paris. Wang said, “My mother was a clotheshorse. I was a big customer at Saint Laurent; I even bought one of the first white tuxedos.” Wang was a competitive figure skater growing
up, which gave her an awareness of how the body moves. She sketched designs for skating outfits, her first attempt at fashion design. Skating was about a totality of movement, music, and appearance. Confused about whether or not to pursue a career in medicine, Wang left Sarah Lawrence College to study at the University of Paris at Sorbonne. She came back to America to finish her degree at Sarah Lawrence College in art history, with an overarching goal to be involved in fashion.

In 1971 Wang landed a job at Vogue as an assistant, and the next year gained the impressive reputation as the youngest fashion editor in the magazine's history. Her experiences there transformed her opinions of fashion. In Wang's book, Vera Wang on Weddings, she comments on her time at the magazine. She says, “Fashion was my life. I had the unique privilege of collaborating with some of the world's most creative individuals. From stylizing the fashion pages to working with designers, I was in a rare position to communicate with women...The incomparable training I received continues to guide my work today.”

Wang came to Vogue during a time of transition for the magazine. She says it “was moving from having been a publication that was all about fantasy—green wigs and green-dyed nails, as if anyone ran around like that—to being one that was all about reality. We were responding to the burgeoning women's-liberation movement and to the needs of the working woman.” This time at Vogue was important also because her father refused to pay for any formal design education through a college. Wang compliments the magazine by saying it “is the best training ground any young woman could have.”

In 1987 Wang made a career shift by taking a job as a design director at Ralph Lauren for two years. Wang is blunt about her reason for the change saying that she
couldn't possibly pass up the increased salary, which was four times what she made at *Vogue*.⁸⁹ Wang dealt with accessories, lingerie and sportswear for the company. This job allowed Wang to design instead of critique and emphasized her business-oriented persona. The position forced her to look at profit and developing items that sold well.⁹⁰

Wang's bridal couture line stemmed from her own shopping experiences while looking for her wedding dress in 1989. Anna Wintour describes this debacle: “[Wang's] own experience...made her aware of a gap in the market for fashion-savvy bridal gowns: there was practically nothing available for the chic American fiancée in search of a modern dress.”⁹¹ Her own custom-made gown cost $10,000 and weighed 45 pounds. Realizing that she was not the only woman who could afford and wanted the luxury of a unique wedding gown, Wang sought the opportunity to branch out on her own into the bridal gown realm after her time at Ralph Lauren.⁹² Her father, a chairman for U.S. Summit Corporation, gave her the initial $4 million to start up her company, Vera Wang Bridal House Limited, with business partner Chet Hazzard. Hazzard and Wang opened up their first bridal salon in a hotel suite at the Carlyle Hotel in New York City.⁹³ Wang originally sold other designers' weddings dresses there.⁹⁴ Another luxury store concept, Vera Wang Made to Order dresses were designed at the Mark Hotel across the street. Wang was able to design custom-fit dresses for a more personalized wedding gown at this store.⁹⁵

Wang was not entirely thrilled by the idea of starting out on her own in the fashion world doing bridal gowns as she views these dresses as a “commodity, not fashion.” Bridal gowns exist for a specific day as a marker of a special event rather than as an artistic medium. Yet the financial opportunity, should she succeed, was enticing.
Wang eventually broke into designing the gowns herself by 1992, but had to put her own psychological spin on the design process to justify the bridal venue to herself. “I thought of myself not as a bridal designer but a fashion designer who happens to do white, ivory, nude.” Because of this, Wang was able to transform bridal gowns into bridal couture, adding a fashionista element into a realm that had been typically reserved for elaborate princess fantasies.

One custom-made wedding dress by Vera Wang is located in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's costume and textiles archives. Designed by Wang in 1999 for Mrs. Sidney Kimmel's December wedding, this dress acts a symbol of bridal couture (see fig. 2.1). When looking at the gown in person, one feels like one knows the bride in a certain sense; the ornate detail of the hand-sewn beads, rhinestones, and sequins on silk satin give the dress an opulent feel, while the knit stretch fabric used on the upper chest and arms lends a conservative component as little actual flesh is shown by the bride when wearing this dress. The large multi-layered silk satin train shows the consumer's ability to afford lots of fabric. Complex beading in a floral and leaf pattern frame the entire torso on the back and front of the dress as well as on the collar and sleeve cuffs, while simple circular satin-covered buttons lead from the bottom of the dress up to the neck (see figs. 2.2 and 2.3). The diamond tiara and red rose bouquet add over-the-top sensational details to the garment, which would allow the bride to stand out in any crowd. Most importantly, there is no ready-to-wear label on the dress; only a “VERA WANG MADE TO ORDER” is used (see fig. 2.4).

As future brides stepped into Wang's bridal salon, they stepped into a world of luxury (see fig. 2.5). The early bridal salon required an appointment for entrance. There
was no open door; one had to ring a doorbell, and food and wine were offered during the consultation. Wang has said, “service is a prerequisite for anything relating to luxury,” and this attention to the customer's experience appealed to the high-end clientele she was looking for. In 1995 Wang opened her store Maids on Madison. This store offers the same level of customer service by appointment, but the gowns were expanded to include bridesmaids' and flowergirls' dresses, which can cost from $200 to $1,000.

Wang turned to other ventures as well in her career to generate extra income. In 1994 she designed her first evening gowns, which were highly publicized by Sharon Stone and Holly Hunter at the 1995 Academy Awards. Her bridal couture expanded into evening wear for celebrities because of the parallel nature of the two types of gowns. Wang says, “(They are both) costuming. I'm making sure it looks good, and my taste is obviously involved, but it's still using someone else's idea of what they want to look like.” These custom-made dresses were sold at high-end department stores, such as Barneys and Nordstrom. These gowns helped financially, because in 1995 her business became worth $10 million.

1997 marks the first year Wang licensed her name. Licensing meant relinquishing product production. This was a practical agreement, because it generated extra revenue to help Wang expand her couture lines. However, it was also a somewhat surprising move
on the designer's part. Wang’s business partner stated earlier in their bridal couture careers that they had “built their own factories. You can't work with expensive white fabrics around machines covered in oil. So we built our own factories like pharmaceutical plants. Impeccable.”

Wang lost a certain amount of control over her projects by licensing them. Her 1997 deal with shoemaker Rossimoda taught her a hard lesson as she was only allowed to design so many shoes per season under the auspices of the producer. Wang would have liked for the shoes to be stylistically daring. Hazzard stated that the biggest issue with working with Rossimoda was that they weren't able to “evolve from season to season and build out the collection. We wanted to [implement] newness faster in order to be more competitive and fashion driven.”

Once Wang realized the extent of the money that could be brought in from such deals, she continued to pursue licensing agreements and product expansion outside of bridal gowns. In 1998 she debuted her first catwalk show displaying evening wear, which led to her own boutique within Saks Fifth Avenue in San Francisco. While Wang already sold her expensive bridal gowns in high-end department stores, this boutique was the only other location aside from the flagship store that sold everything with her name on it. In 1999 Wang struck deals with Unilever to create a fragrance for brides and the Newmont Group to create leather and furs for her garments.

By the spring of 2000 Wang debuted her first ready-to-wear dresses on the runway mixed in with her couture wedding gowns. Wang is blunt about her licensing expansion; it gives her the money to do what she wants to do without anyone else's input. “Bridal pays the bills, but mostly licensing pays the bills. And that's what makes the
ready-to-wear possible. Whatever losses I incur with (ready-to-wear), I cover with fragrance or with china. I've never had that kind of money before.” Susan Sokol, Vera Wang Limited's president of apparel, says, “Ready-to-wear creates more visibility for the brand.” This visibility makes other companies want to do licensing deals. Sokol continues, “It's a domino effect. You can't have one without the other.”

Wang did not abandon her high-end wedding business. In contrast to the vast licensing agreements the designer was signing, Wang's book, *Vera Wang on Weddings*, published in 2001, allows the average person a glimpse inside a world to which most are not privy. It is a world filled with exorbitant amounts of crystal, roses, and fireworks, featuring celebrity weddings and receptions including those of Sharon Stone, Ray Charles, Heidi Klum, Pete Sampras and many others. The book works as a public relations opportunity. While writing about the minutia of wedding dresses and wedding events, Wang supplements the information with photos of her own gowns, which displays the wide variety of styles the designer offers. Mrs. Kimmel's dress is one style of many, and there are gowns that could fit any personality. Anna Wintour wrote the forward for the book. She says, “I particularly love the way [Wang] classifies brides in accordance with their fashion personalities, so that a Sensualist is directed to an ivory pashmina and a Modernist to a Duchess satin pouf.”

The over-sized book is filled with romantic imagery of the wealthiest weddings, from candid family photos, to formal pictures depicting the lush settings such weddings take place in; wineries, sea-side mansions, and elaborate churches. Wang discusses every element of a wedding to some extent. Cakes, music, decorations, toasts, scents, family, veils, tipping the staff, and location are all topics. Wang devotes many pages to what
people should wear, including the groomsmen, staff, and children. She includes a special section in the back of the book that shows the various necklines, sleeves, waistlines, skirt shapes and lengths, trains, and veils that women can choose and assemble to create their own fantasy wedding gown, presumably so inspired by the images in the book.

Wintour adds that the book “is classic Vera: she's down-to-earth, unassuming and, as I learned all those years ago at Vogue, democratically enthusiastic about fashion.” It is hard to imagine a democratic view of Wang, however, with this book. Most people cannot afford the featured settings. While many brides-to-be could fashion their own wedding gowns from the examples provided by Wang, not everyone can afford to have a custom-made Wang gown. It is no surprise, however, that Wang expanded her bridal empire into other objects aside from bridal gowns. The book shows how much material culture and money is involved in any wedding.

Wang mentions the term “lifestyle” as to how the bride and groom should approach the registry. She says, “Before the bride ever gazes upon a piece of Wedgwood or a Waring blender, the bride and groom should agree...where and for how long they plan to live in their first home...It may be premature to register for a full china service or antique silver...[or] Baccarat crystal and monogramed linens could be entirely appropriate and a necessary accoutrement.” Having created a prominent name in the bridal world, Wang was able to venture into other licensing agreements related to wedding events to create wedding “lifestyle” goods. In 2001 when her book was published, her bridal house was selling 10,000 custom-made wedding dresses each year, which sold for between $2,000 and $30,000. It was also a year of major expansion, as Wang partnered with Couteur Design Group and Kenmark Optical for sunglasses and frames and Waterford
USA for her own name-sake collection of “tableware, decorative cases, wine glasses, and goblets.” Her deal with Wedgwood that year was the company's first licensing deal, showing Wang’s licensing power (see fig. 2.6). Her Wedgwood collection was sold at her own boutiques as well as in department stores, gaining her more and more name recognition. Wang signed a new contract with Stuart Weitzman Footwear in 2002. This new deal formed an important partnership proving that Wang was now viewed as a desirable licensing entity by major companies. Weitzman saw Wang as a powerful brand name that could prove fruitful for his own company as Wang's aesthetic supplemented the Weitzman label. Working with a designer like Wang also benefits a licensing company with publicity and professionalism. Wang approached Weitzman with the idea that the deal would bring in more money for the designer as the shoes would sell faster with increased production and distribution methods. These shoes were neither low nor high end, as they cost between $200 and $300.

By 2003 Wang had created an empire initially based upon the bridal realm, and had expanded it to portray a certain wealthy lifestyle. Her net worth was $80 million by this year. In March 2002 Wang debuted her first luxury eyewear line at the Vision Expo in New York City, an international trade show. Wang emphasized that this eyewear could appeal to any style of woman be it athletic or feminine. Wang was able to cater to more consumers by having two components in the line. The Vera Wang Luxe collection goods were created in Japan and Italy and cost between $190 and $1,200 while the Vera Wang Collection cost only $150 to $250. Both lines were sold at high-end department stores such as Barney's, Neiman Marcus, and Bergdorf Goodman. Wang’s china and crystal collections, also sold in the same department stores, were in the top ten best
selling patterns for wedding registries. In 2002, Wang also debuted her first ready-to-wear line in contrast to her boutique gowns. In 2003, Wang signed a license with Rosy Blue for diamonds, engagement rings, and wedding bands for the bridal couture market. Sold at Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue, these jewels sold for between $300 and $200,000. Again, Wang was able to financially appeal to consumers with more conservative spending habits as well as those who could afford more. \(\text{118}\)

In 2004 VEW, Limited created a licensing deal with Wang for other home wares and lingerie, and in 2005 a Vera Wang baby collection was established. With more licensing projects added every year, Wang was being distracted from other projects. She said, “It's hard to juggle being a business person with being a creative person. As the collection gets bigger, it gets more challenging.”\(\text{119}\) The detail-oriented woman who had once built her own factories for quality control was forced to give up some oversight. The responsibility of designing all of these goods could not solely fall on Wang's shoulders. The designer hired a new staff of designers and material buyers to help create these looks.\(\text{120}\)

On August 24, 2006, Kohl's Stores announced its latest licensing deal with Wang for her own exclusive line at the chain store, at that time named Very Vera by Vera Wang, although currently it is labeled Simply Vera Vera Wang. In the company's press release, Wang is quoted as stating the brand “will retain my personal design sensibility of a relaxed effortless approach to fashion. This new partnership with Kohl's, a company with incredible integrity and trust in the marketplace, is a true honor.”\(\text{121}\) The press release labels Wang as “one of the most respected designers in the world” and that her “premium collection is modern and addresses fashion demands inherent in today's female
Wang has completely stepped away from any semblance of couture or high fashion with her line at Kohl's stores. The Kohl's shopping experience in itself is impersonal with consumers left to meander through the large space on their own, navigating between the different goods sections, which include everything from kitchenware to shoes to children's clothing and women's fashions. Most everything sold in Kohl's is created for the mass market at large; there is something for everyone, though sometimes one must dig to find it, and nothing is daring or offensive. Wang has catered to this broad, faceless consumer group with clothing, lingerie, jewelry, bedding, and accessories that leave anyone familiar with her couture wedding gowns and garments with the impression that the designer has toned down her passionate drive for revolutionizing fashion.

The Simply Vera Vera Wang Abstract Top is from the spring/summer 2010 collection at Kohl's (see fig. 2.7). The label says that the shirt is made from 100% polyester giving it a smooth, satiny texture. The Simply Vera Vera Wang tag is highly visible at the top right of the garment on the underside of the fabric on the back making it easily recognizable in the store (see fig. 2.8). The garment is not form fitting and would require wearing a belt around the midsection to define the waist. The shirt is 27 ½ inches in length, which means it comes down to the upper thigh on the average woman. It emulates a dress in this way, but requires the wearer to have pants or leggings underneath. An additional piece of fabric has been sewn around the hem creating a layered look. The top of the shirt has a scoop neckline, and gentle pleats in the fabric come down from the neck so that the fabric never lays completely flat against the body.
The sleeves are capped with a two-inch slit up the center. At the top of the neck on the back is a keyhole button closure (see fig. 2.9). There are two patterned fabrics used for this top. The sleeves and the top of the back of the shirt are constructed with four pieces of grey and white polyester with a pattern that is reminiscent of snowflakes or flowers in bloom. The rest of the shirt is made with peach and white polyester with rounded geometric forms and lines. The Kohl's website states that the pattern is supposed to attract attention for the wearer while the polyester is perfect for warm weather because it's so lightweight. Also notable is that the garment is machine washable for everyday wear.123

This top is part of the Whimsical Garden line and retails for $48.

Kohl's prominently emphasizes Wang's collection throughout the store, most likely because Wang is the most well-known and legitimate name in fashion in the building. While Britney Spears for Candies and Daisy Fuentes's lines are more trendy, these stars do not carry the same fashion clout as a professional designer like Wang. Simply Vera Vera Wang is the first fashion line consumers see when they walk in. Wang's entire collection is not lumped in one area of the store all together, but rather specific items are dispersed evenly throughout the other appropriate sections. Simply Vera Vera Wang's women's clothing is in the women's clothing section, the underwear is in the lingerie section, and the bedding is with the other bedding products sold there.

What makes her line unique is the way her goods are set up. In each section Wang's collection is shown on a special display with a black and white photo of the designer and a quote by her concerning her beliefs on design and her work. In women's wear the display says, “Vera Wang on Style...This season is about being effortless and relaxed in your everyday style. Each piece can be dressed up or down depending on your
mood and occasion.” The bedding section display says, “Vera Wang on Bedding...For me, bedding is about creative living. Your bed can be simple yet sophisticated, or fun and whimsical.” Wang even has thoughts on something as simple as sleepwear. The display for this section quotes Wang as saying, “Sleepwear should be comfortable. It's feminine, not fussy...stylish and charming. It's about embracing style while being confident and relaxed.” These statements are broad and simple enough that they can be applied to anyone's preferences.

Kevin Mansell, Kohl's president, says that the average Kohl's shopper only buys either clothes or accessories, but not both during a typical shopping experience there, which is odd considering the two groups are placed so closely together. The strategy with Wang is to have her goods spread throughout the store so that shoppers must see more of the store and other departments, in hopes that this will entice consumers to buy more goods.124

It is debatable whether or not Wang's designs are fashionable or worth their price. Most of the women's garments are baggy and shapeless. Shirts are plain in fit and construction. Ribbed turtlenecks come in either orange, red or green and cost fifty dollars. Long sleeved tees are part of the “Floral Twilight Collection” and contain vibrating hues of purple, red and blue. The “Paradise Luxe Collection” has an expensive sounding name, but the actual garments lack the same sense of caché. The red tulip skirt contains a bold red floral pattern outlined in wide black lines and placed atop a rusty orange background. Made of 100% polyester, the skirt has a smooth texture and shiny look, but clearly is not silk. Some handbags include faux textures imitating snakeskin and leather. On one bag a warning entails, “The dye used on this item may transfer when item is damp or wet.
Please exercise care when in contact with light-colored surfaces.” This oversized imitation-leather bag costs $90. Many of the pieces in the jewelry collection and belt collection include fake diamonds, emeralds, and rubies. One $28 belt made of a spandex material features a large buckle made of octagonal shape faux diamonds.

While Wang mentions that bedding can be versatile in style, there were only two patterns to choose from on display. One, named “In Circles,” features bold large patterns reminiscent of the red tulip skirt, but in burgundy, off-white, orange and brown geometric forms that mimic Merrimeko designs. The other bedding pattern, entitled “City Night,” uses deep purple and charcoal for the main color theme. A light purple coverlet of 400 thread count made of a 100% cotton shell and 100% polyester fill felt soft and inviting and had a cross-shaped pattern woven into it. It costs $100. Its companion charcoal-colored ribbed queen-sized comforter costs $350.

Wang's intimate apparel products also strive to be more luxurious than they are. Wang provides a wide enough range for people's preferences selling “Simply Essentials T-Shirt Bras” in plain colors for $36 as well as the “Simply Luxe Push-Up Bra” for the same price. The style of the Luxe garments are not terribly different from their simpler counterparts, but written detail on the label explains that the “new gel pad push-up” provides “natural shaping, enhanced cleavage” for emphasis. Other labels include phrases such as “light as air luxury,” “effortless support,” and “smooth shaping” to enhance the consumer's perspective.

The feeling of the loss of couture quality in these products is most notable in the size labels where under each size letter the phrases “Made in China,” “Made in Pakistan,” and “Made in Vietnam” stand out. Nothing is made directly under Wang's supervision.
These labels isolate the buyer from any connection with the designer, black and white photo display or not. Wang's Kohl's collection is the antithesis of personal customization.

Critics have questioned whether the move to a big box retailer is the right step for Wang's career, since this new retail setting is so different from an upscale boutique environment. Wang is fortunate to already have expanded her empire through licensing projects, because this has exposed non-couture consumers to her name and designs. Like Mizrahi, Wang's jump to Kohl's is also not something new from a high-end designer. Fashion correspondent for Newsweek Dana Thomas says Wang's line for Kohl's is a “natural extension” of her licensing projects. Wang feels as if she's been “quite elitist in terms of price points” over the entire course of her career. She feels confident that a lower-priced line at Kohl's will not harm her reputation. In fact, the designer perceives her Kohl's line as benefitting affordable design when she says, “What's important is that there's good quality, trust and value at all levels of merchandise.”

The Kohl's line may also represent the more down-to-earth side of the designer's personality. While Wang sells luxury goods, she is not constantly wearing fur-lined jackets or diamond earrings. Much of the aesthetic of the Kohl's line mimics what Wang wears in real life. One *Vogue* writer who had the privilege of getting to know Wang described the designer's fashion sense. The article says, “Her more habitual attire is Danskin leggings, T-shirts, and wooly beanies for getting down to work in the studio; she wears Bermuda shorts and Lacoste polos for weekends as a golfing mom. Her going-out style for a formal dinner in Palm Beach, for example, is along the lines of 'an old gray tank' tugged over a gold lace skirt, with a ruby-bead necklace.” Wang admits that, “I am partially the person I design for. As a woman designer it's a very different experience
than a man. Men are coming from it from a very abstract point of view. They're thinking of how they see a woman. Some of the women designers I admire most are women who feel what is to be a woman in clothes.” In 2005 Wang said, “What we've developed is a brand that means something to the average American.” What better way to reach the average American woman than through a big box chain?

Kohl's feels confident about the agreement as well. Mansell explains that Wang's line is projected to be profitable for all involved. He says, “When we launch these brands, often there are questions either on the investor or media side of 'How do you know it's going to be good?' They say, 'Vera Wang at Kohl's seems more of a stretch,' 'It's the next step up' and 'Why do you feel so confident?' The reason is, we do tons of research.” This involves questioning potential customers about their opinions of the designer and how much they are willing to spend. This research proved accurate as goods from Wang's line sold out in many stores across the country within the first few weeks of the line's debut. Kohl's response to this demand is as equally important as the goods themselves. By increasing the amount of stores nationwide that same year, the store is able to fill empty clothes racks faster than before.

In other interviews Wang takes a more honest approach about Simply Vera Vera Wang. She readily admits she is not just doing this to bring great design to people who normally cannot afford her higher end goods. In 2007 Wang raked in $300,000,000. While this amount seems massive, royalties dictate that the designer probably only makes 5-10% of that total, between $15 million and $30 million. It costs Wang $10 million to support only her fashion line and nothing else, which she says led her to the deal with Kohl's so as to gain more money to continue her couture design production. Wang said in
2007, “We need money. We need infrastructure, design talent, promotional budgets. We need a lot more to play in the sandbox, so to speak. Because of that, every decision I have ever made has been motivated by staying alive and keeping the doors open with the employees that I have.” Rather than discussing the democratization of design at Kohl's, Wang takes a self-promoting stance by saying, “This is about keeping my business going so I can do what I love most.” Wang's company has stated that the money generated from her mass-produced line will be used to finance two new stores in New York City and Los Angeles for her own fashion line.

Wang has had to sacrifice a certain amount of quality in the goods that are produced for a big box line because she has had to relinquish control over the selection of which goods make it into the Kohl's line. Wang's other challenge shifting to the big box fashion realm is that there is not as much freedom for impulsiveness. She says, “When I start a collection I don't really just only sit and sketch. I play with fabric. I look at it. I see how it works or doesn't work. And what we make in our sample room may not even be what is eventually on the runway. We can start with a jacket that may become a skirt and start with a top that may become a t-shirt. We just don't know.”

Wang has mentioned this transition has required some getting used to. For her own line, the designer has the ability to create 300 to 400 designs per season and then has the freedom to choose what she thinks are the top 50 to 60, filtering out what doesn't meet press and retail standards. In one interview, Wang describes how her spring/summer 2010 collection ended up being in black and muted tones rather than colorful hues typically attributed with warm weather seasonal clothing (see fig. 2.10). Wang requested her design team purchase 80 to 90 new fabrics, because the designer
loves working with extraordinary textiles.\(^{139}\)

She explains, however, that, “It's hard to develop them. It's extremely costly. It's about weaving and finishing and things that you can only really do if you're going to do a collection line, because you can't invest that kind of money into development unless you're looking for that kind of end product. So we had worked with all the Italian mills we work with and we had picked these incredible colors and finishes. It's gone beyond nylon and polyester, a whole new level of engineering in mills to create these new fabrics, which are not sold at every line. They're mostly reserved because of cost for the collection lines, and by collection lines I mean the most expensive lines in the world.”

These expensive and exciting fabrics, however, were not sew-able, making them impossible to work with. Wang has a supply of washing machines in the design office where fabrics are washed several times before and after tailoring to see how laundering affects the material. After these attempts to get the fabric to work as well as experimenting with draping and sewing techniques, Wang had to give up and throw out the fabrics only two weeks before the show. Without this hassle, Wang says she felt that black was the natural choice for color scheme.\(^{140}\)

Yet for Kohl's, she must produce 20 garments per month planned in advance. Wang says, “I wasn't used to being very, very merchandise-focused – to have to choose and make the right decision and then be able to put it back together on the floor as a collection. I couldn't just say, 'Here's the sequin dress and here's a little short skirt.' They would say, 'You have five skirts, Vera,' and then we had to choose together which are the best five.”\(^{141}\) Kohl's has its own group of designers that create Wang's line for the store. At one meeting with the designers, Wang brought in some of her popular looks from
previous seasons from her own line. Wang didn't entirely care for what these designers presented her and suggested they add more color “like a skirt in gold brocade.” The designer says, “Kohl's went, 'Yikes. Vera, this is for nearly 1,000 stores. You can't just start throwing things in,' like I do on collection.”

Wang embodies the struggle between designing for a big box line and a couture line. In the end, consumers are not receiving the same couture designs by Wang for less money and with a different retail experience. When one goes to Wang's boutique, they expect a certain level of quality and attention by the designer for the price. When one goes to Kohl's, they expect affordable prices and are willing to sacrifice silk for polyester and personal customer service during their time there. The fact remains, however, that it is much easier for a person with money to spend it at a lower-end store than it is for someone without deep pockets to buy couture garments. By having a line at Kohl's, Wang is making her name brand more accessible to the entire population, both in geographical and financial terms. It is not so much a matter of democratizing Wang's couture designs at Kohl's, because the designer does not actually create the styles there. Rather, Simply Vera Vera Wang is another way to popularize Wang's name across the entire country.
Chapter 3
Norma Kamali

“If you're a talented person who loves design then you better get familiar with technology, with merchandising, with marketing, because that's the future of fashion.”

All Wal-Marts are not created equal, apparently. Searching for a Norma Kamali garment at the big box retailer is not as easy as it sounds. Having no luck at one of the major retailer's stores I was informed that I could go to another Wal-Mart up the road that carries her items. After scouring the second store's women's wear section I came up empty handed again. I asked a Wal-Mart employee there if they had any Norma Kamali items. Her response: “We used to sell her things here. Now you must go online to get them.” This answer was more than appropriate given Kamali's favoritism of technology throughout the years to promote herself and her garments, even revolutionizing the concept of the fashion video. After another failed attempt to purchase the designer's big box garments at a third Wal-Mart, I realized I'd have to do just that; I would have to turn to walmart.com if I ever wanted to see Kamali's big box line. While Wal-Mart is considered the iconic American big box store, perhaps Kamali's preference for the latest iPhone applications, Skype, and website technology is setting the stage for the greatest virtual big box of them all; the internet.

My medium-sized women's raglan jersey dress from Norma Kamali's Wal-Mart line arrived at my doorstep 3 days after I ventured online to order it. The first noticeable feature of this dress was its smell. Keeping the jersey material in tightly wrapped plastic for several days emphasized the garment's synthetic origins. After a few days the smell subsided and the dress became approachable. The construction is incredibly simple (see fig. 3.1). The main body component is rectangular, and the stretchable jersey fabric, rather
than any tailoring, does all the fitting. The dress has a scoop neck and ¾ length sleeve with cuffed wrists. This simplicity allows for versatility depending on the wearer's preferences and needs. Accessorizing would add all the drama to an ensemble using this dress. While the fabric reminds me of the spandex most people wear to the gym, a fair comparison since Kamali revolutionized sportswear, it seems appropriate for everyday wear. The way the jersey hugs the body and its smooth feel, almost reminiscent of silk, gives the dress an aura of high-fashion style. In stylized flowing script, the label reads, “Norma Kamali Made in Indonesia,” in contrast to Kamali's contemporary designer label OMO Made in the USA (see fig. 3.2).

Like Mizrahi and Wang, Kamali is a native New Yorker. She says, “If you live in New York, in a sense you live on the street. I was bombarded by what the city has to offer.” Kamali's mother supplied their home with paintings and art supplies. This, combined with the fact that the family was not wealthy, promoted a creative atmosphere during Kamali's childhood. She says, “I would go [to Klein's on 14th Street], spend $2 for a dress, take off the ugly trimmings and buttons, make it shorter or cut off the sleeves, add stuff to it, get my own lace and decorate the dress. Then that dress was mine, my own creation. That's how it all started.”

While Kamali initially thought she would become a painter, her first job was at a buying house. Yet Kamali became dubious about the fashion industry from her experiences there because of how business-focused the job was instead of being design-oriented. She then pursued illustration after receiving a degree from the Fashion Institute of Technology and enjoyed certain projects in the field where she was able to draw people and figures. She was deterred, however, because of how few jobs there were in the
illustration field. She next decided to do something completely different from her background and worked for the airline Northwest Orient, where she gained practical office experience and the ability to travel abroad on weekends affordably for $29 roundtrip. This opened up a new world to Kamali, involving the free spirit and optimism of the 1960s. Kamali became aware of revolutionary fashion as she purchased garments from the famous London fashion houses, such as Biba. Friends back in America complimented her fashion finds, and Kamali realized she might be able to start a business selling these goods across the pond. “I saw an ad in the paper for a basement shop on 53rd street at $285 a month and thought, 'I've got to be able to pay that rent. I have to be able to do this. It's ridiculous not to.” With the help of her husband, the two opened up Kamali Shop together in 1968. Kamali credits the openness of the 1960s and 1970s that allowed them to experiment with the business to find what worked best. The shop revolutionized Kamali's life as she eventually decided that she herself would make clothes to sell in the store. Kamali's first garment sold was a suede and snakeskin design on a suede jacket and pant set. She says, “My customers were probably involved in rock and roll and music, because music was very important at the time.” Kamali's store gained attention from other designs she created and sold, including hot pants, making it one of the trendiest shops in town.

The store eventually expanded, and Kamali realized it was time to take the business to a new level by moving the store to Madison Avenue, where she hired several Italian tailors to make her garments. The designer received an education in tailoring from them while breaking ground in women's wear. She says, “I made beautiful suits for women at a time when the man-tailored look was really not the fashion. The styling was
so nice and clean that it helped me find direction. I had beautiful lace dresses and suits.”

By 1976 Kamali’s marriage had broken down, and a divorce ensued. While this independence was something new for Kamali considering she had been married since she was 19 and had only $96 left over from the divorce, the designer was able to make her own name in the fashion business using her talent and ingenuity. With her husband removed from the business Kamali was forced to ask herself, “does anybody know that Norma Kamali exists?” Thus, OMO Norma Kamali was born, the OMO standing for On My Own. In order to start up this fashion venture, the designer sought funds from practically everyone she knew. She became more mature and business focused to see that the enterprise did not fail. Kamali says that she chose the name OMO not to make a statement but to make her stand apart from her husband's name. She says, “I learned how to be a woman who could take care of herself, which was very important to me as a person, and I learned how to run a business. Everybody assumes that if you're creative you don't do those things. It's only me as a designer to know about business.”

Kamali's creativity flourished most notably through the innovative materials she used in her garments. During her divorce, Kamali was forced to live a leaner lifestyle, one that included bedding down in a sleeping bag at night. Noticing how comfortable and warm it was, Kamali took her scissors and sewing materials to it and created the iconic sleeping bag coat that became well-loved by fashionistas (see fig. 3.3). Kamali says that fabric sparks her creativity to design. Because of this, Kamali is still known today for her parachute cloth garments, swimsuit collections, and sportswear as she revolutionized the use of fleece for contemporary sportswear. She says, “I originally started doing
swimsuit coverups out of sweatshirting [fabric], and I was just doing samples. Eventually, I had 35 samples of nice, comfortable clothes that everyone could relate to. 

Kamali's fleece coverups were popular, but the designer was afraid other manufacturers would copy her designs. People she knew in the business suggested she pursue a licensing agreement so that her goods could be produced at a competitive price in a large market. Kamali ended up licensing her fleece sportswear designs to Jones Apparel Group, which proved to be a lucrative deal when the company made $30 million in Kamali design sales in 1983. Much of this success had to do with Kamali's hands-on and practical approach to the line, even though it was licensed. She said at the time, “I fit the clothes myself so that I know how the clothes feel and look. I'm living in 1985, and I'm doing a lot of things that women are doing in 1985, so my personal needs and associations are like everyone else's.” Kamali would even try on the garments herself. It was a simple process: either she liked the fit, material, and style and kept the clothes in the line, or she didn't and removed them. When Kamali had an idea for a garment, she would explain her vision to her merchandiser, who then would come back to the designer with materials that seemed appropriate. Samples of the garments would be made for both lines and then Kamali would tailor or alter them to her liking. In 1986 the Jones Apparel Group expanded Kamali's presence within the company to include a line that was priced from $65 to $240, putting it in between her high-end OMO line, which retailed for between $500 and $5,000, and her sportswear line. The move was to increase Kamali's name exposure while trying not to sacrifice quality. The garments, mostly suits made of quality fabrics such as velvet, silk, and wool, were to be created in American
factories and sold in higher end department stores.\textsuperscript{163}

The same year as this expansive deal, Kamali ended her licensing agreements with the Jones Apparel Group, because the designer felt the line was being over distributed to stores and consumers that had little interest in Kamali. Kamali claims that the Jones Apparel Group sought to make the line available on a massive level, one that Kamali says she didn't want to be a part of. Kamali became critical of licensing her name at this point in her career. She says, “A license has a short life and the people who have invested in it want to make every penny that they can on that short life. I've gone to stores and died over what I've seen with my name on it. If something is going to have my name on it I want to be able to control what it looks like. Designing is what I really love and what I want to protect.”\textsuperscript{164} Yet, the sweatshirt and cotton garments sold by the Jones Apparel Group were highly profitable. Kamali decided to keep some of the employees who worked on the line and deal directly with the factories and shipping so as to regulate more of the business.\textsuperscript{165} The designer line was priced between $130 and $480. At the time she said, “I don't need a billion trillion dollars. I need to do what I like.”\textsuperscript{166}

This insistence on quality caused the designer considerable drama, however, as she sought contracted workers to produce the garments. Kamali, feeling that some union workers could not create goods to her standards, hired non-unionized workers. The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) picketed Kamali's store and other contractors.\textsuperscript{167} Frustrating for Kamali was the fact that she had indeed paid the homeworkers fair wages and had allowed them to work at home because of their other schedules and personal needs. In the end, Kamali was absolved of any issues regarding fair wages, but was ordered to pay a $10,000 fine for allowing homeworking.\textsuperscript{168}
This incident turned Kamali off from wholesale production, and the designer accepted licensing deals with both the Italian manufacturer Zamasport as well as with Bloomingdale's department stores. Zamasport produced the kind of garments Kamali had become famous for, such as her swimwear, sportswear, and women's wear, and the goods were distributed throughout Europe and at Kamali's stores in the United States. The deal appealed to Kamali because of the freedom it allowed her to design without having to worry about the manufacturing. More importantly, she didn't feel the same sort of pressure that Jones had applied to over-distribute her products.\textsuperscript{169}

In 1988 Kamali signed a three-year agreement with Bloomingdale's, initially based upon her swimwear. Kamali said at the time that the deal would be that she designed the clothes while relinquishing production methods. In one \textit{Women's Wear Daily} article Kamali said, “Are you crazy? There is no way I would want to be a manufacturer again. I don't buy fabric. I don't pay contractors. I design, I get a royalty, and that's it.”\textsuperscript{170} Kamali also felt that having her goods in a nationwide store would help her gain publicity for her designer line at her flagship stores.\textsuperscript{171} (It should be noted, however, that in 1986 Bloomingdale's only had 16 stores.)\textsuperscript{172}

By 1991 Kamali was making headlines for producing fashion videos instead of runway shows in an attempt to stand out from the crowd. While a fashion show exists only in the moment, a fashion video endures.\textsuperscript{173} One of her earlier videos, entitled “Interview,” presents Kamali's 1985 line in a unique way. Directed by Kamali herself, the fictional film follows the ups and downs of a New York City model. The definitive scene for Kamali's garments occurs as the model is trying to watch a movie in a theater. Women in oversized plush coats with leopard prints and zebra stripes strut in front of the
crowd in the theater. They wear outrageous hats with large feathers on top. Animal prints and fuschia link all of the garments. Overall, the scene has an air of elegance, with the women poised and striking, mimicking the looks of the 1940s.

By the mid 1990s Kamali was gaining recognition for her more affordable garments, including her 18008Kamali line, which emphasized versatile garments convenient for both day and evening wear and more affordable than her designer line.174 Fashion writer Constance C.R. White described Kamali's clothes in 1998 as “populist” for their wear-ability.175 That same year Kamali decided to allow regular shoppers to have the same experiences as her celebrity clients by providing a service in which representatives for Kamali shipped clothes to customers' homes based on their preferences and then allowed shoppers to return what they didn't like. It provided personal service while growing a clientele from outside the country.176

In the mid 2000s Kamali was approached by Gary Herwitz, the vice president of Jacques Moret, to revive Kamali's 1980s sportswear look by licensing refreshed versions of her older garments under the Everlast name. Priced between $60 and $600 in hopes of being a profitable partnership, analysts predicted the agreement would make about $10 million within its debut year.177 In the early 1980s the mail order catalog Spiegel used its catalog to promote Kamali's garments, including everything from leggings to $7,000 dresses.178 In 2006 Spiegel took to Kamali again for its spring edition, but with more affordable garments priced between $12 and $89. Like Kamali's current Wal-Mart line, the Spiegel collection featured the designer's signature all-in-one garments and a website that showed consumers how to wear these items in every possible way.179

While Mizrahi markets his personality as much as his goods and Wang markets
her name more than anything else, Kamali has a different sort of personality. What has made each of these designers successful is the way they approach business. For many years Kamali refused to have photographs of herself published. She enjoyed being able to approach customers in her store without them realizing that they were having a discussion with the designer herself, which allowed Kamali access to her consumer's needs. She says, “It was fulfilling when I learned how to run a business. I like being in a position of making a profit, and I like the balance of being creative and having that business that operates creatively and earns money. So I'm a much better designer because I have kept the two in balance.”\textsuperscript{180} In an interview published in 1986 the designer also says, “I feel very satisfied and don't feel like I have to be a household name. To actually be doing what I love to do and have people want it is enough for me.”\textsuperscript{181}

Over the course of her career, Kamali has chosen licensing projects with the objective of quality control and being able to design the items herself without hiring a design team. While Vera Wang’s licensing agreement with Kohl's allows the average person access to Wang's name, Kamali's deal with Wal-Mart gives the designer access to people not normally familiar with her or her designs. Furthermore, Kamali has not become a household name like Mizrahi and Wang; there has been little advertisement for her Wal-mart line; there are no television shows starring the designer; and it may be said that the general population would not recognize Kamali's face. In 2000 the designer said, “I hire people to expedite my designs. I have patternmakers in my sample room helping to create the garment. I hire all the people who will help me make it happen,” emphasizing that she does the actual designing herself.\textsuperscript{182} During my visit to the Norma Kamali flagship store in Manhattan, a sales representative informed me that while there is
a Wal-Mart liaison who works in the office, there are no designers employed by Wal-Mart as Kamali herself creates the designs sold at Wal-Mart.

Kamali says she agreed to a Wal-Mart line for moral purposes. She says, “I did the Wal-Mart association just before the downturn (of the economy), because I felt that for me, personally, it was a time for me to address people who need clothes that look really great that have great quality and don't have access to it within their budget. I felt as a designer in this point in my career that I should do that. And then there it was, the economy was there, and I see that more and more of my clients are shopping at Wal Mart now and saying 'oh wow this is so great'.” 183 Kamali also believes that the American mindset has changed whereby shopping at big box stores is not a trend, but a new way of consumerism. Because of this, the designer views a line at the major retailer as another way to gain customers in an ever-growing attempt at diversifying her retail means. 184 Always business saavy, Kamali has kept herself firmly planted in the reality of retail and its affect on her goods. In 2000 she said, “What is the reality of the way people want to shop? And is the store ego or is it serving a purpose?” 185 Furthermore, Kamali has said that, “unless you're a megabrand, you cannot be successful in a department store. And I didn't want to be a megabrand...Department stores represented what wasn't right for me. Specialty stores are another venue.” 186 One can hardly say that Wal-Mart is a reflection of ego, and it does serve the greater American population. In all its vastness, the big box store has become its own sort of specialty store in that it specializes in just about everything.

Unlike meeting with a designer to come up with ideas for a fancy gown, the big box store provides one of the more faceless means of shopping between consumer and
designer. Arguably, an even more isolated form of shopping is through the internet. Yet Kamali believes both are instrumental for accessing her designs. On September 17, 2009, Kamali created a groundbreaking fashion show staged at the Apple Store in the SoHo neighborhood of New York City entitled “Norma Kamali: The Democratization of Fashion.” In a statement to the crowd she says, “We don't own anything anymore (when it's put online). And because it's out there it's for everyone we have to be prepared to have it ready for everyone. And so I have my WalMart line and my Ebay line that are a different price range, making it accessible, but I also think this [the smartphone] is making it accessible. Anybody anywhere can just download the app and buy whatever we show today, learning and finding out what's going on.”

The structure of this fashion show is critical in understanding how Kamali views her garments, and somewhat parallels how her website and store are designed. At the show, models wore garments from each of Kamali's lines. The models held fans which expressed which line the garment came from; OMO, Ebay, or Wal-Mart (see fig. 3.4). (Kamali's more affordable E-Bay line was founded in 2009 and sold exclusively through the internet.) Not only did this allow attendees and viewers to know where to purchase an item, but Kamali made the statement that each of her designs is worthy of a catwalk show, and that no design is better or worse than another, regardless of material or production. At Kamali’s flagship store, pieces from the Wal-Mart line are sold in the store in the same fashion as her more expensive items. Numerous mannequins show how almost every garment produced by Kamali fits on a human body: one wrap-around jersey shirt from the Wal-Mart line was on display with a $1,600 fishtail long skirt made of parachute material, mixing low-end with high-end (see figs. 3.5 and 3.6). Had a sales
representative not walked me through the store, I'm not sure I would have been able to
tell a Wal-Mart skirt from a $317 skirt of another synthetic material. As the
representative pointed out, both would be great for travel as they do not wrinkle.

At Normakamallicollection.com, the designer's website groups her garments by
each line, then further breaks it down by the materials used for that line. One may select
the OMO Made in the USA line and specifically look at garments made of parachute
material, then next look at all the garments made of jersey for the Wal-Mart line. On
specific material pages, every single other material for garments produced for her
designer lines are listed on the left hand side of the page and materials for her Wal-Mart
line are listed at the bottom, again emphasizing that while each material may be unique,
they are all available. Having her garments presented online has become part of her
design process. In 1999 she said, “I sketch it today. Tomorrow I make a sample. The day
later I photograph it, scan it, put it up on the website and see what people think.”

The implications of incorporating technology into selling her lines goes beyond
being able to sell garments to more people. Kamali tells Fox Business News that, “The
information you get [on your phone] the minute a runway show takes place, you see it
[on your phone] and now you're a part of the elite, which means there is no elite anymore,
and you're seeing it when everybody else sees it. So now we in the fashion industry need
to learn how to get clothes to people as soon as they see it, so that they're not losing
interest in what's in the store now that will get marked down 'cause they want it
tomorrow.” This means increased production methods and greater availability to the
masses. Wal-mart is the icon of big box stores and mass production. The only thing that
can trump this is the internet, which is why Kamali also promotes her Wal-Mart line on
her own website. She is taking one of the most accessible stores in America and making it even more accessible through the web.

Kamali's Ebay line is a perfect example of this usage of the internet to promote her brand. Kamali says on her website that she was inspired by seeing the diverse range of her goods that were being sold independently through Ebay, including garments decades old as well as items that were already unavailable through Wal-Mart. The garments for the Ebay line feature the designer's signature all-in-one look, but marked down garments from the rest of her lines are also sold there. Everything is sold for between $20 to several hundreds of dollars.¹⁹⁰

Kamali says that also in 2009 her company started using Skype as a way to talk with customers. In essence, she's making big box shopping via the internet more personal as buyers can contact a representative to discuss the garment they want to purchase or already have bought. In one interview, Kamali gives the example of being able to inform a customer of how to wear a $20 dress from her Wal-Mart collection several ways to maximize the use of that dress and give greater value to her customer. Kamali also believes Skype has transformed the way her goods are produced by being able to deliver detailed information quickly to manufacturers and suppliers abroad. She says, “We need to tell them immediately if something is not fitting right especially if they're going right into production. [Using a model as a fitting form] We put the garment on that fitting form. They have a fitting form in their factory, too, and we can then say to them 'The sample you sent us that is going right into production is not fitting the way we want it to, and so we want you to take it in a little bit, we want you to follow this instruction, we're going to send it back.' They'll get the package in a day or two, but they need the information right away. We do take pictures, we do send photos, but for me to say it's actually more the way it fits around here,' (as she motions toward the rear end of the mannequin) and they understand what I'm talking about with a live motion. This is extremely helpful especially in a time-sensitive situation. Every minute they wait just costs money.”¹⁹¹
Such production methods and the material of Kamali's goods present an interesting stance in the debate concerning democratic design. Unlike Wang, Kamali's brand name at Wal-Mart is actually designed by the designer herself. Unlike both Wang and Mizrahi, Kamali has a feel-good, do-good vibe about her clothes at Wal-Mart, even fitting in with the green movement with organic cotton shirts. However, not all lines are created equal, and Kamali's garments, while equally presented, are not always equal in craftsmanship or material. According to a sales representative at Kamali's flagship store, expensive specialty-themed garments that include copious amounts of safety pins or buttons for aesthetic drama are produced in the tri-state area of New York City and are hand beaded (see fig. 3.7). This is a great discrepancy from goods produced for the Wal-Mart line, which include machine sewing by non-US laborers and exotic countries of origin. When looking online at two bikini tops, the eric band in Kamali's OMO line and the triangle band for the Wal-Mart line, it is difficult to distinguish much difference between the two in structure. They are both string bikini tops with animal print material. I called Norma Kamali's customer service representative to ask why the OMO top cost $75 and the other $15. She explained that it came down to material. The 80% nylon, 20% lycra suit cost significantly more than the 100% polyester one, but the representative tried to assure me that Kamali did not sacrifice quality in either one.

It is also important to note that Wal-Mart is the iconic big box store in America, for better or for worse. In October 2009, luckymag.com announced to its online readers Kamali's $35 sleeping bag coat would be available in Wal-Mart's brick and mortar stores. Interestingly, the responses varied. Some readers responded favorably, happy that they could afford to purchase a signature Kamali garment. However, several readers pointed
out the ethical implications of shopping at Wal-Mart. One poster writes, “walmart is evil(sic). their goods are made by exploiting workers in developing countries (often little children) (sic). think about they can sell it so cheaply--you know they are still making a profit even at this insane price (sic).” Another goes even further saying, “i am so, so sad that her line's at wal-mart, as i can never ever ever give them my money (sic). not even for a completely adorable, cozy warm coat that's only $35. and it breaks my heart a little (sic).”

Trendy garments featuring the designer's name can be had at any price, as Kamali's Wal-Mart line continues to democratize her name. Yet the fact remains that expensively-produced goods simply cannot be sold for a low price on a mass market scale. Kamali's goods show us that a Wal-mart shirt can look great paired with an exciting yet expensive garment, but in the end the Wal-Mart shopper is still getting a jersey shirt and a wealthy client can indulge in the luxury that is parachute. Kamali's usage of technology makes her designs accessible to viewers, but purchasing those designs is based on income.
Conclusion

The proliferation of big box stores in America is more than just a trend; it's a new and highly desired forum for commerce. Mizrahi, Wang, and Kamali have been smart to capitalize on this new marketplace. While modern department stores were vehicles for transmitting fashion, regardless if someone could afford the goods sold in them or not, it has yet to be determined what the effects of high-end designers' goods at big box stores will ultimately be. Mizrahi has proven that it was a financially successful endeavor for him. Yet Target is also a special big box store in its ability to attract and effectively market such major designers' goods at its stores. Kohl's and Wal-Mart are completely different entities from Target while also still fitting into the big box label. While Kamali may want to generously lower her price point for her garments by using Wal-Mart as a venue, Kamali is relatively unknown, and Wal-Mart does not invest heavily in snazzy advertising campaigns. Without the star-power that Mizrahi's name exudes, Kamali's garments at Wal-Mart will have to shine on their own. Kohl's, on the other hand, already has pursued celebrity-as-designer lines featuring Jessica Simpson for Candies and Lauren Conrad among others. Wang is one of the first major legitimate fashion designers to license her goods at Kohl's. While Kohl's devotes much of its store space to clothing, it also does not have the same mass appeal as a Wal-Mart or Target. Without people randomly stopping by to pick up essential home products, Wang's name will have to either lure people into the store to purchase her goods or stand out enough inside the store to generate interest. Kohl's advertising campaigns for Wang's line as well as their catchy displays in the store may prove to be well worth the effort.

Contemporary high-end department stores and boutiques still have an important
role in transmitting fashion, as couture is not found in the big box store. Big box fashion lines are not intended to replace them. Rather, each designer may use the profits from these lines to help fund their couture line in a cyclic nature: The low-end lines support the high-end lines, but the high-end lines make the low-end lines desirable. These low-end lines are desirable, because people can have a garment with one of their favorite expensive designer's name on it. The exclusivity of the fashion world also helps to perpetuate this kind of desire. I believe high-end critics are so critical of big box lines, because they are afraid that the elitism of the fashion world will dissipate if everyone has access to an expensive designer's name. As Mizrahi and Kamali proved with their daring runway shows featuring their big box lines, the concept of the runway show is evolving into something not just for the upper echelon of society or those with V.I.P. passes.

Regardless of name association, the style of the garments in big box stores will have to prove desirable in its own right as well. I do not believe that high-end design is democratized through big box lines, because big box lines do not contain the same materials nor were they produced in the same methods as high-end garments, and design is more than just how something looks. Low-end designs have to be fashionable enough so that people will wear them practically. Consumers at big box stores are not looking for a radically daring or artistic garment. For that, they must pay more money for customization or interesting materials.

The desire for these low-end garments is there if designers remember their demographic. Mizrahi has described this in his Target line as, “design, not fashion, but as fashionable clothes,” versus, “obsessive crazy stuff that will only look good for 15 minutes.” When looking at Mizrahi's high-end and Target blazers, the black swirl linen
blazer is striking compared to the beige blazer for Target. The garment for the mass-retailer lacks the drama of the high-end blazer's textile pattern, the soft feel of the linen, and form-fitting construction. Kamali and Wang's big-box garments also stand apart in material and construction from their higher-end lines. Kamali's exciting parachute material, safety-pin detailing, and notoriously sexy swimsuit designs, all of which have made the designer famous, have not made it into her Wal-Mart line. While Wang has created an empire for herself licensing her name, her latest venture with Kohl's lacks the fantastic opulence of silk and hand beading for which she is known.

Furthermore, there is a greater significance to the fact that Mizrahi doesn't know who makes his garments for Target and that he doesn't care. Mizrahi's comment represents much of America's attitude toward the cheap-chic movement whereby the goods are affordable in part because they are made in bulk outside of America. The trailer for the HBO documentary *Schmatta: Rags to Riches to Rags* features the statistic that in 1965 95% of clothing sold in America was produced in America. Today it is only 5%. Gone are the days of the bustling New York City streets of the garment district. As each designer's high-end line proves, it is expensive to have goods made in the same neighborhood where they are also designed.

When critics claim lower-end big box fashion lines are democratic, I'm left wondering who benefits from this democratization? Former garment makers who have lost their jobs due to outsourcing would probably oppose the loss of American clothing production. While American consumers may enjoy purchasing big-name lines at their local big box, they are still not buying an authentic item created by the designers themselves. Mizrahi argues his clothes at Target were fashion staples. In reality, I find
this to be a guise for creating bland, simple styles completely unlike the designs for which the designer is famous. What are ultimately being made accessible are Mizrahi's, Wang's, and Kamali's names through their mass-appeal big box lines. Their exciting and expensive designs remain in boutiques and the closets of a few very lucky people.
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