# The Museum at FIT FASHION CULTURE Podcast

## Make it Ours: Crashing the Gates of Culture with Virgil Abloh | Dr. Elizabeth Way and Robin Givhan

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*[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]*

**[DR. VALERIE STEELE]**
Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City.

*[UPBEAT MUSIC CONTINUES]*

**[DR. VALERIE STEELE]**
Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

*[MUSIC CONTINUES]*

**[DR. VALERIE STEELE]**
If you like what you hear, please share your thoughts on social media using the hashtag, #FashionCulture.

*[MUSIC CONTINUES FADES OUT]*

**[DR. VALERIE STEELE]**
It's now my pleasure and privilege to introduce Dr. Joyce F. Brown, the president of FIT.

*[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]*

**[DR. JOYCE F. BROWN]**
Welcome to all of our visitors, as well as those of you who are part of the FIT family. So tonight we have a very special program for you and I have the great privilege of introducing you to an extraordinarily gifted writer, communicator, inspiring and insightful analyst of fashion, the arts, the influence of race and politics on our culture and society. Of course, I could only be describing the Pulitzer Prize winner and dear friend of FIT, Robin Givhan.

*[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]*

**[DR. JOYCE F. BROWN]**
You know, on a personal note, for me, there is really nothing quite like that “aha!” moment when you read something and it evokes sort of a palpable connection with the words and the description of the situation that you're reading about. And you can't help thinking, “That's perfect.” I, you can't help thinking, “I would never have found those words on my own, but it describes perfectly what I'm feeling about what I'm reading.” And I get a lot of that when I read Robin Givhan’s writing. It's really a great gift.

So Robin has most recently served as the senior critic at large at the Washington Post in a career that spanned over two decades at the Post. So, the Washington Post is a platform from which she has wielded immeasurable influence through her hard work, her thoughtfulness, her searing intellect, her compassion, incredible integrity, and dare I say, much needed civility. Now, we all know that twenty-five years is longer than many, if not most, marriages. But in recent days, Robin has announced with what seems like mixed emotions her departure from that part of her family. And so I wanted to briefly pay tribute to you, Robin, to publicly recognize all that you have contributed to fashion, to politics, to culture over your career to date. We are grateful for your voice, for your stature, for your courage and we recognize the journey and the road that you have paved for those coming behind you. So congratulations to you for that.

*[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]*

**[DR. JOYCE F. BROWN]**
Now, Robin has recently completed her book entitled Make I*t Ours: Crashing the Gates of Culture with Virgil Abloh*, and tonight she has graciously included us on her national book tour and we will all look forward to hearing about the development of this important and signature work. So I note in closing that the good news is we bid you adieu from the Washington Post, which has surely lost a gem, but it's not goodbye as you continue to share your talents with us from new vantage points. And to quote you in your own inimitable fashion, “We know you're not done.” So on with the show.

*[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]*

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Good evening everyone. My name is Elizabeth Way and I am a curator here at the museum at FIT. Thank you Dr. Brown and Dr. Steele for those introductions. Thank you all for being here tonight and thank you so much Robin for coming to talk to us about your new book.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Thank you so much for being my conversation partner and thank you all for coming. It's a gorgeous evening. So I appreciate your coming inside to listen to me.

*[ELIZABETH CHUCKLES]*

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**

I will say that I read this book in about a day. It was so informative and so interesting and so readable, which makes it very much like the last book of yours that I read, *Battle of Versailles*. So I'm really excited to talk about that and I want to tie those two books together for my first question.

So, one thing that immediately jumps out to me in your book and *Battle of Versailles* is that you can take one designer or one event and not only kind of unravel its importance in fashion history, but use it to show how these show these much larger trends in culture and society and specifically with these works bring in the changing impact of Black people and Blackness in Euroamerican culture. So, I want to ask you, how do you find your subjects and why are you drawn to this approach?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Well, sometimes I feel like the subjects find me in a way because with *The Battle of Versailles*, that was the first book that I wrote independently and my literary agent actually approached me and said, "I think there's a book here." And with Virgil, I was drawn to his story in part because I found it complicated. Because it stirred complicated emotions and thoughts for me because when I covered his work on the runway, I was often quite critical of it. And I say that just because, like all the receipts are out there if you Google, like I can't clean it up. But at the same time I recognized that he had this enormous fan base that connected with him on a level that was very different from the way that designers and their customers usually related. So that's what sort of drew me to him.

As for the way that I wanted to write about him, you know, I came to fashion as a writer who wanted to be sort of in the feature section of a newspaper. I wanted to tell stories. I wanted to weave narratives, but I didn't really have a particular passion for fashion. I mean, it was the beat that happened to be open and I applied for it thinking, “Well, I wear clothes and the travel's great, so maybe.” And so I always looked at fashion to some degree as a bit of an outsider and felt that I was kind of standing in the doorway of the industry and kind of reporting back to the people who were, you know, farther outside. So it was always the way that fashion connected to a larger story that intrigued me. I mean over the years I obviously came to greatly respect and be fascinated by the players within the industry. But I always felt like I was not part of the fashion industry. I was part of the journalism industry.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Well, I think it really comes across in your writing and you say you were quite critical of his work, but I think it's that criticism that, I know at least people like me, that's what I want. I don't need a description. I can see the pictures.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Mhmm.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
So, the criticism for me is very key. So, thank you for that. So, my next question is, it seems like for years now the fashion industry has been lamenting that the old order has broken down and

that the fashion system is broken. And although this book centers on Abloh, it goes a long way in explaining some aspects of how the fashion industry is changing, from the impact of social media and the ascendance of branding over product, to the cultural impact of men's wear on the evolving definition of luxury. So can you explain a bit of this trajectory, in your own words, as you've witnessed it over your career in fashion journalism?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah. Well, so I started out covering men's wear and at that time, like a hundred years ago, it was, really, a small part of the industry and it was an industry that changed just so incrementally. And men's wear designers by and large didn't really have runway shows. They tended to show their collections in their showroom. And for me, it was a fantastic way to learn about the industry because it was a part of it that was moving at a much slower pace. It was a part of the industry where you really had access to the designers and they would take the time to explain how the industry worked, how the production worked, and it was a really wonderful sort of introduction and learning and education. So being able to go back and really leap into the men's wear part of the industry and see the degree to which it had grown and the degree to which the change had just sort of sped up was fascinating and in so many ways I feel like, I mean well in so many ways the men's were part of the industry is really what's fueling the big changes in fashion at large today.

You know, all of the huge trends that have sort of swept through the industry, like, you know, sort of the blurring of gender, athleisure, street wear, all of that stuff has really come from the men's wear side. Sneaker culture has come from the men's wear side. So, in this book, I wanted to get a sense of one: why did Virgil's rise happen on the men's wear side? You know, what made it possible and thinking about whether or not it could have happened on the women's side and you know, I don't think it could have. And going back and looking at the way that things like the rise of hip hop and the entrepreneurs who grew up around that, how that sort of merged into street wear, or I should say, sort of blossomed into street wear.

One of the sort of data points that I found to be really fascinating was when the NBA changed its dress code. And when that happened in response to this sense that the NBA had become too quote unquote “thuggish” and it was a response to a lot of the young players picking up on that early hip hop style of the lowslung trousers and the gold chains and sneakers and all of that. And so the NBA decreed that if you were on NBA business but not wearing your uniform, not on the court that you had to wear essentially business casual. And they were very specific in the things that were banned. And because of that, the sort of entry to like these stadiums became kind of a runway as these young players embraced fashion, and designers realized that these young basketball players had the perfect physique to carry off these clothes. And it sort of transformed basketball players, and athletes, and essentially young black and brown men into the fashion icons on the men's wear side. And you know, I think that sort of shifted the way that people thought about men's wear, the way that they thought about who gets to take the lead in men's wear and in many ways opened the door for someone like Virgil to walk through.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**

I really loved that you talked about that and just the kind of this history of men's wear over the last like twenty, thirty, years and how it's changed. It's really–when I read it, I was like, "Oh, there's an exhibition in this description."

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah, the way that it's changed is, you know, is so phenomenal because thinking about hip hop, which was this very sort of narrowly defined style and then, you know, when it got into stores…

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And most of the entrepreneurs behind these brands were Black or brown, it was designated urban.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And urban was really just a way of separating it from old school sportswear,

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Because even though it might have started out as a style worn in urban situations, it was embraced throughout suburbia.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And then you know that sort of became part of the one of the many looks that was under the umbrella of street wear. And, you know, all of those things just sort of transformed men's wear from this place of high-end suiting and tailoring.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
It's a fascinating change. I remember when you're talking about like these basketball players being like models and then you know obviously football players are doing the same thing now and clothes look so different on them.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
But they, as like every male sports player, have like realize that fashion is going to be a big part of their personal brand.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
It's a way for them to distinguish themselves off the court. It's the way for them to reach out beyond the boundaries of sports and it's also quite lucrative for them. I mean, and another point when I sort of recognized or noticed how much things had shifted, there–I was once sitting at a men's wear show and this was like years ago and I happened to sort of look down the runway at the feet and every single male editor was wearing super cool sneakers and every female editor was wearing these ridiculous stilettos. Not that they were not ridicul–

*[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I mean… for the situation they were ridiculous, you know, and I just thought you know how much things have changed now that you're in your Vans and I'm in my little Adidas. and that's all due to men's wear.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
So your book highlights Virgil Abloh as a new kind of creator, one focused on communication and youth and community. And you use his DJing as a metaphor for his design ethos. You quote–I quote from you, “DJs don't write songs; their skill was in knowing which refrains beats and chords to stitch together to create something irresistible. Abloh was a child of that cut and paste improvisation he was generation Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest.” So, is this what you think made him so evocative of a cultural shift, this new perspective, this new kind of generational perspective?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah I think it made him emblematic of new possibilities in the way that you could enter the design world. I think it made him a profound frustration to a lot of classically trained designers who I see out there in the audience.

*[ROBIN LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And I think that it created a real tension that was interesting to me. You know, on the one hand, that kind of improvisational mix and match, style was really beneficial for him and was very welcoming to people who felt like, you know, because they didn't have a particular set of skills, that the skills that they did have were less valuable or, you know, were not enough to let break into the fashion industry. You know, I think it's connected to, and I don't know if you're going to like mention this later, like his 3% philosophy, which was this idea that if you took a pre-existing item and transformed it by 3%, then you had created something entirely new. Which is not true.

*[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And copyright lawyers will tell you it's not true.

*[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And designers who have originated the idea will tell you it's not true. But that was this sort of working principle for Virgil. And I think sort of the optimistic view of that or sort of the sort of positive spin on that is to say that, you know, if you're a kid out there and you want to be a designer and you don't know how to sew and you don't have access to, you know, a place where you can learn to do that, that yes, you can take a t-shirt and you can, you know, revamp it into something that reflects your creative sensibility and and that's and that's okay. Like that is–that's real work, individual work.

I think sort of, the other side of that is, you know, you can't just take something that someone else has done and tweak it and declare that it's new and different. Particularly when you start getting into tweaking other people's trademarks. And so, he was in fact, the recipient of a few cease and desist orders and he was sued because of those kinds of copyright infringements. I'm just something that Raf Simmons said and Virgil was an enormous fan of Raf's and you know, he essentially said "I think Virgil is a very nice guy, but I don't think he's creative, and I prefer designers who are creative." And Virgil's response to that was, "Well, I still like Raf Simmons."

*[ROBIN CHUCKLES, AUDIENCE LAUGHS]*

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Well, something that occurs to me about this kind of 3% philosophy is that in some ways it's a little disingenuous because it seems like it lowers the bar for entry into fashion, but in fact Virgil was incredibly creative and he was pulling from a lot of different… Not everyone can do what he did otherwise everyone would do it.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
And certainly there are people who try. But I do think that it's it's a little bit it's a little bit kind of downplaying his own talent and he was, from everything you write, a very humble very sweet person, but I do think that it it takes away from what he was bringing to his fashion ideas, what he was bringing to his creativity.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah. I mean, in so many ways, when I went back and I listened to many of the conversations or many of the speeches that Virgil gave and many of the conversations that he had with people, he was often, it seemed to be working out his design philosophy in real time. And would often contradict himself in the same speech. And some of that I think was sort of just inherent to his

personality. I mean, he was a talker and he talked through things and he talked about his work and a lot of a great deal of his approach to fashion was about sort of the meaning of things and the way that a garment made a person feel and the way that it connected a person to a broader community. And it was less about the specific silhouette or the way that something draped against the body.

And so for, you know, one of the things that would often confound people, myself included, when I would review a collection, is, you know, I would look at a a garment and I would think, you know, well, that's not… that's ill-fitting or, you know, that's not particularly, you know, unique. But in many respects that wasn't the first thing that he was concerned about. He was more concerned about the relationship of the garment to its environment to its community. For instance, he, like a lot of designers I think, who start out in men's wear and then sort of veer into women's often at the behest of women who are buying the men's wear.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And sort of egging them on and saying like when are you going to do something you know just for women and then they do that they make that decision and so often the women's wear has nothing to do with what they were doing for men's.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
You know, the men's is this incredibly cool tailoring with maybe a loose fit and a great sort of chic, sophisticated, you know, swagger. And then they design women's clothing and they suddenly decide they need to do pencil skirts and dress them up in corsets. And so when Virgil started doing women's, you know, he went from these incredibly cool pieces of, you know, street wear of like the varsity jackets and, you know, the cargo pants and then did a collection for women inspired by Princess Diana with giant poofy crinoline dresses. And I'm like, what makes what?

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
And I think it goes to show that there's still an idea of what fashion is for women's wear. And men's wear is a space where people feel like they can break the rules, where they can be more creative, where it can be more vernacular, but then you step into women's wear and suddenly you do have to fit like this cookie cutter mold that the industry has put out.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah, I mean I think women's still has this element where it feels like the rules still matter. And increasingly on the men's side unless you are really engaged in sort of very strict tailoring the rules feel much more malleable and they feel much less… It feels like you can get away with not

following them precisely because men's wear feels more engaged with popular culture at large and women's to me, to my mind, still feels much more self-contained within fashion.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
So, we touched on this this idea of the 3%. Virgil  Abloh has been accused of copying. And of course, he kind of thought about this as remixing and his 3% rule. But in some cases originators like originators like the streetwear pioneer April Walker sued him. But in other cases, he patented a lot of his own designs.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Oh, for sure.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
And so, so what I want to ask you is like, do you think this holds up? Do you think that his design philosophy holds up as a philosophy that can continue to grow and live in the fashion world?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
The 3%?

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah. Or whatever iteration of that other people might pick up.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Well just to answer the first part of that question about his own sort of copyrighting. he you know had a copyright on the red zip ties. He had a copyright on like for walking which was like something that he put on boots. You know, he used to joke that Duchamp was his lawyer, but he had seriously skilled lawyers.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
There was that kind of a shucks kind of attitude towards design.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I mean I can't remember the exact number of you know copyrights he had sort of in process but like I want to say it was like at least a hundred. So he was very conscious of building his business. He, you know, was a very smart business person and was very thoughtful about wanting to create something that was both lasting and that was substantive. You know, he used to talk about Off-White as his resume, as his legacy. And it certainly functioned as a resume for you know his eventual rise to Vuitton.

As for the 3%, you know, while I have great admiration for what Virgil was able to do with the power of marketing and branding and storytelling, and I give all props to the power of a wonderfully creative t-shirt. I have a soft spot for, you know, the folks who are in design school who are learning the craft and who are, you know, sweating over the details and increasingly, I think that is becoming more of a niche part of the industry. And when I say niche, I mean that it's

a part of the industry where there's a real connoisseurship and understanding of what has gone into that. I wish that there was more of a happy medium between those two things.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
That you could have something that was well-made that fit you, that made you feel a certain way because materially how it was made, but doesn't have to be a kind of couture or Savile Row. Like, there was something more accessible but still well made.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And also that there was more of a welcoming embrace for different kinds of skills at that sort of tippy top of the fashion industry. I mean, I think one of the lessons that Virgil was sort of attempting to teach the industry is that, you know, these might be the five skills that for hundreds of years you've determined were essential to being a great designer. But there are these other five skills that perhaps you've never considered that may in fact be just as powerfully important to be a great designer. You've just never given people who have these alternative skills the opportunity.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Interesting. So, one thing that really occurred to me when I was reading the book that stood out to me is the way you write about  Abloh's work and the way it optimistically addresses the aspirations and interests of young men. And there's been a lot of talk recently outside of fashion on young men in Euroamerican culture being left behind, turning to radicalism as this kind of backlash to this kind of elevation of women. So, is there a blueprint in how Abloh addressed the hopes and anxieties of this demographic in his creative work for a larger society to emulate or do you think this is kind of more under the umbrella of consumerism?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I mean, I think it can be both, right? I mean, I don't think they have to be separate. You know, one of the aspects of Virgil's relationship with the artist formerly known as Kanye West was this real enthusiasm for and curiosity for aesthetics. And, you know, ranging from fashion to art to architecture to interiors, you know, furniture. And there were subjects that perhaps a lot of young Black men are interested in. Like, I don't know. I don't know the stats on that, but it they're subjects that quite often, they are not allowed to, or sort of given the permission to engage in, in a way that is sort of enthusiastic and looked at seriously and just sort of allowed to go down the rabbit hole on those topics with other people who look like them and/or share a similar background. And so I think in many ways that was sort of the beginning of, you know, their bond that they could have these kinds of conversations with each other and they took each other seriously. And they encouraged others  of their generation who had those interests to engage and took them seriously.

You know, Virgil would use the word “practice” quite often and in some ways it was sort of protective because if you know if you're just practicing, then you're just sort of constantly trying to become better and trying to get to the next level. But it was also a way of sort of adding this layer of seriousness to the work. And I think for a lot of the young men who were in his circle, or

even the ones who just sort of DM'd him and he responded, the fact that he took them seriously. And that he didn't sort of shrug it off, but that he used a word like this is your practice. I think it was huge and was a permission slip to think about this thing that others may sort of deride or dismiss to think about it seriously. And I think that's really powerful when someone says, "I take you seriously."

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah. And he's done so much work with young people with encouraging them even kind of in his legacy. And that was something that was really powerful in the way you wrap up the book and talk about how he's continuing to kind of nurture people in fashion.

So one of the tensions that you beautifully illustrate that would we touched on a little bit already but in the book is the tension between craft, knowledge, and experience in the fashion industry and the space that marketing and branding take up in our current fashion culture. In some ways luxury's redefinition is a perfect reflection of 21st century lifestyles but in other ways, it feels like consumerism has flattened fashion design and displaced quality craftsmanship and creativity. So, we touched on it a little bit, but I want to see how do you see this dichotomy moving forward? You said like, you know, maybe there's hopefully, there's a way to have a middle ground, but is branding and this kind of hype around fashion, do you think that it will reach a point where it kind of bursts and we swing the other way?

*[ROBIN LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Are we too far away from that moment right now?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
There's so many questions. I have so few answers, but I have many thoughts.

*[ROBIN LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
When I think about luxury and that–I use the term in the book–and it's such a challenging term because it has been kind of diluted to the point where essentially, people will use luxury to refer to anything that's expensive. And on the one hand, I think that Virgil's definition of luxury was this idea that luxury is what you value. And the “you” being key, because it means that many different people can write the definition of luxury. And they can apply value to many different things as opposed to one small self-selected group that determines what is considered valuable and what is considered luxurious. And I think that's something to celebrate. I mean, I would like–it would be nice if this sort of luxury could be sort of disengaged from this idea of a price tag.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I doubt that that will happen in my lifetime, in anyone's lifetime. But one of the comments that I loved that a luxury consultant made was, you know, she was talking about her clients and how they will ask her sort of how they can determine whether or not they have sort of reached this level of creating a luxury good. And she would often say to them, "Well, if you can envision your product in a museum a hundred years from now, then that's a good indication that what you've created is a luxury product because it means that it has stood the test of time and it has become something that is reflective of a you know sort of the highest artistry and craftsmanship of a particular society." And I thought that that was a really sort of great instructive definition. But I think that the sort of tweak that Virgil makes to that or the assessment that Virgil makes to that is, you know, what ends up in a museum and how it's defined within the museum is, you know, continues to be determined by a very select group of people.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And it is determined by the people who are writing the stories who are weaving the narratives. And, you know,the difference that I sort of saw come out of that sort of dichotomy is that often times you go into a museum and you might see a piece of antique French lace. And you know it is essentially sort of defined as the highest form of artistry. But then you might find an example of woven kente cloth and often it's characterized as a craft or as something that is more anthropological as opposed to art.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And the difference is really just sort of who's writing the wall text, who's making that kind of determination. But each of them is a luxury. Each of them is an artistry because each of them is deeply valued by someone who has determined their worth.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
So one of the things you talk about is a big part of his design code revolved around irony.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Mmm.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
And so there were a lot of ideas. There were a lot of thoughts in these products even if they were kind of very familiar to us from other contexts. So do you see his work as closer to art? As you know some fashion is art, some fashion is not art, but do you see it in that context because it comes from this, you know, this kind of Dada tradition and it references a lot of–it reaches out towards the art world.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Okay, I'm going to say something very controversial. I don't think that fashion is art. I think fashion is artful.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And I say that with full backing I think of my friend Blake Gobnik who's a fantastic art critic, and wrote the definitive Warhol biography. And the reason that I say that is because I think too often fashion in its insecurity feels that it needs to align itself with fine art or music or some other field in order to not necessarily justify itself but to give it more gravity. And I don't think that's necessary.

I think that fashion alone is an extraordinarily artful craft that is incredibly difficult to pull off at the highest levels. And you know, a piece of art doesn't have to accommodate a human body. A piece of art doesn't have to accommodate rain and snow and subways and taxis and cars. And so to me, fashion is able to be absolutely exquisite and just take your breath away and also allow you to walk down the street and get caught in a rainstorm. I think that alone is just an extraordinarily accomplishment and it's just magical and doesn't need to call itself something else other than what it is.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
I think that's fair.

*[DR. ELIZABETH AND ROBIN LAUGH]*

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
So, we are going to turn to audience Q&A. Okay. So, the first question, what is your next project?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Oh my god. Really?

*[EVERYONE LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I don’t know! You know, in my fever dream, it would be like, you know, the film version of the book. But you know, that's a fever dream.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Who do you think would play Virgil Abloh?

*[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS, DR. ELIZABETH AND ROBIN LAUGH]*

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
So okay, let’s see. There's a lot of great questions here. Uh, luxury brands have relied on street fashion to stay relevant for years. What is going to make luxury brands relevant and is street relevant still relevant?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Oh, wait. Read that again.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
So, luxury brands have relied on street fashion to stay relevant for years. What is going to make or I guess what is making luxury brands relevant and is street fashion still relevant?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Ah that's a really good question. I mean, I do think that street fashion is profoundly relevant but I don't know that I would even call it street fashion anymore. I mean, I'm kind of stealing a line from Kim Jones, who essentially says, you know, the clothes you wear on the street, that's street fashion.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I mean, I think that at one point, yes, street fashion used to be this other category that sort of tapped into sort of hip hop and skater culture and had a very distinct look and flavor.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
But, you know, to me, street wear is like the monster that just ate men's wear.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Because I don't know that you could sort of separate out street wear and you'd have any men's sports wear left.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
And a lot of women's wear, too!.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And a lot of women's wear. Yeah.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
I kind of think of it as like before sports wear, people dressed in this very formal way and then we had sportswear and now we have street wear and I feel like it's moving towards more casual but it's just the way people dress.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah. I mean I think you know the few things that sort of completely stand apart from sort of street wear is a tailored suit. But I don't know many people who feel like they go to many events or are in many places where they feel like you know a tailored suit is required.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And bad things will happen if you don't wear one.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
There'll be consequences, yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I mean maybe if you're on trial. I think that's…

*[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]*

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Maybe Yeah. But maybe not. Okay. From someone working on a fashion book, "I'm wondering how long you spent on this, the biggest challenges you encountered, and the greatest lesson you learned from it."

So, three questions. So, first, how long did it take?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I started  the research probably at the end of like the very, very end of 2022.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And then I took a book leave from the Washington Post for 2023. And then did edits through the beginning of 2024.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
That's incredibly fast.

*[DR. ELIZABETH LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Two about two years.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
That's incredible.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Well, that's from like a museum curator. That that's really fast.

*[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
From like a newspaper, it's like, “Oh my god, that was forever.”

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah, but for a person–for people who write books, that’s very fast!

*[EVERYONE LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah. I mean, yes, it was a bit faster, but it still felt like a good amount of time to be able to sit with it. The hardest part was definitely deciding which elements of Virgil's really expansive career and Catholic interests would I needed to focus on in order to tell the story.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
You know, there is a book to be written about Virgil's interest in DJing and in music, because that was a huge part of his life. You know, I really just sort of focused on it in trying to

understand how that impacted his sense of fashion and design. And there's a whole other book to just be written about the many many collaborations that he did, which seemed endless. So I would say that just sort of being able to narrow it down from there and you know, trying to make sure that I had sort of this the story of the many connections and relationships and meetings correct.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Because so much of this, you know, when it happens in the past and when someone, you know, has recently passed away, there is this sort of fog of sentimentality and love and surprise that can sometimes be hard to navigate through. And so sometimes you sort of have to go back to people multiple times or you have to get multiple accounts in order to sort of get clarity…

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah, to triangulate on it.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And the biggest…?

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
The thing that you learned.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
The thing that I learned was about the power of optimism. And you know, I put this in the acknowledgements and said that at the end of the day, I felt like the story of Virgil was really a story about optimism, because on several occasions, he said that he chose to be optimistic. And you know, I was completing this book in 2024 and really starting to be able to talk about it in 2025. And I felt like that was a moment when choosing optimism feels practically radical.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And Virgil chose it not being naive and not hiding from reality, but simply saying that the only way forward is through optimism.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And I think that's really for me that was a really powerful lesson to take away.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
It's a really–

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And to hold on to.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
It's a very distinct choice especially.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Until 2028. Not kidding.

*[DR. ELIZABETH WAY LAUGHS]*

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
So this is an interesting question because I thought about this a lot when you were talking about branding and consumerism and new definitions of luxury. So the question is where did he stand on sustainability? Because the idea that if it's expensive, it can be luxury I think helps feed into the idea that we can just make more of everything. But maybe that wasn't his view.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah, that's a really good question. And I don't know for sure where he stood on sustainability. I didn't find… I didn't come across anything that was specific to sort of a philosophy or a stance on sustainability. But that said, I also sort of didn't use that as a specific reporting path. So I don't know how he felt about sustainability.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Where did you see Virgil's architectural skills come into play with his work?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
In a couple of places. I mean, the first one of the sort of most basic, was just in the way that he was able to talk about, explain, and to sell his vision. You know, he was very skilled at you know being able to get people to sort of see an idea that was bouncing around in his head. And he also was really skilled with graphic design, which was something that his architecture professor said stood out about the models that he built in architecture school. That he was very focused on the graphic design of it.

The other aspect was just in the way that he thought about a garment and it was less about the shape of the garment and more about the garment in its environment. You know, he was a huge fan of the work of Rem Koolhaus like a lot of architects of his generation. And so, you know, in keeping with that, his interest was… what was the phrase or what was the word? Sort of complexifying. Complexifying, is that the word?

*[DR. ELIZABETH CHUCKLES]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
It was a word that didn't sound like a word to me.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And it was this idea that the way that the garment existed in space was of greater interest than sort of the function of the garment on the body.

*[AUDIENCE MEMBER COUGHS]*

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
I really loved you talking about his architectural models and how he like presented this one and like his building was like red and it was like embedded in the Chicago skyline, but like those buildings that he changed the scale and like made them recede and like he like was able to like point to his in a way that was all about the design of the entire model and not just the building.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
And I thought that was a really brilliant kind of precursor to his design later on.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah. And to be clear, I mean, he went to… he studied architecture with no intention of being an architect. You know, he didn't tell his parents that though.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

*[DR. ELIZABETH LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
But he went because you know after his undergrad, in his last years of undergrad, he had taken this art history course and sort of opened his eyes to this idea that that art, that design could completely transform a culture. And he had studied engineering as an undergrad. And so architecture seemed to be this kind of bridge between that sort of very… sort of was it left brain thinking of the engineer and the right brain thinking of an artist.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
It was really–I mean very young he was very he seemed to have a very clear trajectory. Even though he moved in a lot of different directions and was creative in a lot of different different directions, he had a lot of wherewithal as like an undergraduate to be like, “This is something I

can do that will please my parents but will be a springboard for what I actually want to do." I thought it was very impressive.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I mean I'm not quite sure he was that clear on.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY, LAUGHING]**
This is looking back.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I do think that in real time he was able to make those decisions. And he was also, you know, a very… I mean, I was fascinated by the way that he sort of functioned as the the child of immigrants.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And the sort of centrist nature of his sort of professional demeanor. And he had a kind of confidence that he belonged in sort of every place and every space that I think can be quite challenging for some people. And one of the stories that I loved was when I went back and talked to one of the principals in the architecture firm that he worked at.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And it was the only job that he ever had that was actually with an architecture firm. And I love the description of how he was hired because he apparently walked in with his resume without an appointment and basically said that he really admired the work that this design firm had been doing and talked himself into a job.

And I asked the principal, you know, have you ever done that before? Just like, hired someone who just walked in off the street like that? and he said no and I've never done it since.

*[AUDIENCE MAKES SOUNDS OF APPROVAL]*

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah. And this is–I think that's something that's so it's really admirable about Virgil  Abloh, but it's also really singular. And so this idea that he can be replicated. He made it look easy, but like you can't just replicate that career, that creative trajectory, that way of thinking or that confidence.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I don't think you can replicate the career, but I think you can take a lot of lessons that are applicable to a lot of other different careers. And to me, one of the biggest lessons was this kind of confidence that was not a swagger.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And it wasn't hubris. It was, you know, I think probably Virgil said it best when he got the Vuitton job and he was thrilled and it was a job that he desperately wanted. But you know there was a lot of surprise that he got it.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I was surprised.

*[AUDIENCE MEMBER LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And his response to that surprise was well why not me?

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And I think that is a great lesson. Why not me?

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
So Virgil  Abloh was the mentor director at Louis Vuitton and then Pharrell Williams  took his place. And so where do you see this, let's call it the opening up of the fashion industry at this high level? Do you feel that we're going to continue to move in this direction, in which you know the creative directors bringing a lot of experiences from a lot of other places or do you think that there'll be some brands that really still value a traditional fashion education?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I mean I think the evidence of the latest round of new creative directors suggests that fashion continues to value a more traditional creative director. I do think that Vuitton is a particular kind of brand.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And it's one that has long sort of situated itself as more of a cultural institution as opposed to a fashion brand.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I mean, I think that speaks to its history. The fact that, you know, unlike a Chanel or a Gucci or a Balenciaga, you know, there's no sort of historical garment or silhouette that defines Vuitton.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhmm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I mean, when people think of Vuitton, they think of LVs, you know, they think of the brand, uh, the branding.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
I would have hoped that the lesson that Vuitton took from its experience with Virgil was that it is extraordinarily beneficial for a brand to widen the aperture when it looks for a creative lead. And so to some degree it was disheartening to me the choice of Pharrell who is an extraordinarily talented musician, producer and has a really strong visual identity.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
But to me it felt like the lesson that Vuitton took from Virgil was the idea that he would often talk about sort of like the shortcuts and the cheat codes.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
And for him, you know, talking about shortcuts and cheat codes, it was a way of saying to outsiders that, “I'm going to tell you the stuff that you really need to know.”

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
So that you don't have to get bogged down with this extraneous stuff that's just sort of keeping you outside.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
With Pharrell, I feel like it was a shortcut to get to a sort of popular culture, pop culture audience.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
That he could bring. But I'm not sure how much that widened the aperture…

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Mhm.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Because, I mean Pharrell was sitting there in their front row.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Yeah.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
In his diamond bedazzled sunglasses.

*[AUDIENCE MURMURS]*

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
So the last question which came up many times in this are what new designers are you finding interesting right now?

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Oh that's such a challenging question.

*[DR. ELIZABETH LAUGHS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Hmm, I mean they're not–they're not particularly new but I mean I find Rachel Scott interesting. I think that's her name, right? Diatima. I find Willy Chavarria interesting. I am for some reason

obsessed with Sergio Hudson at the moment. I mean, they're not new. They've been around for a long time.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
But they're relatively young in the industry.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah. Yeah.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
I'm obsessed with Grace Wales Bonner. I just think that she is such an interesting designer and men's wear.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
There's more and more women designing men's wear.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
The very last story that I wrote for Our Dearly Departed magazine was about Grace Wales Bonner and I got to spend some time with her in London in her studio and she is extraordinarily talented and has I mean I think has done so much to just add to the conversation about men's wear and also the conversation about men's inspiration and you know where it can come from and how it can be utilized in fashion.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Definitely a different approach. so we still have a lot of different kinds of fashion designers in the mix.

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Yeah.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Everyone please join me in thanking Robin Givhan for being with us here today.

*[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]*

**[ROBIN GIVHAN]**
Thank you so much you guys.

**[DR. ELIZABETH WAY]**
Thank you for those questions. They were amazing.

*[AUDIENCE CONTINUES TO APPLAUD INTO A FADE]*