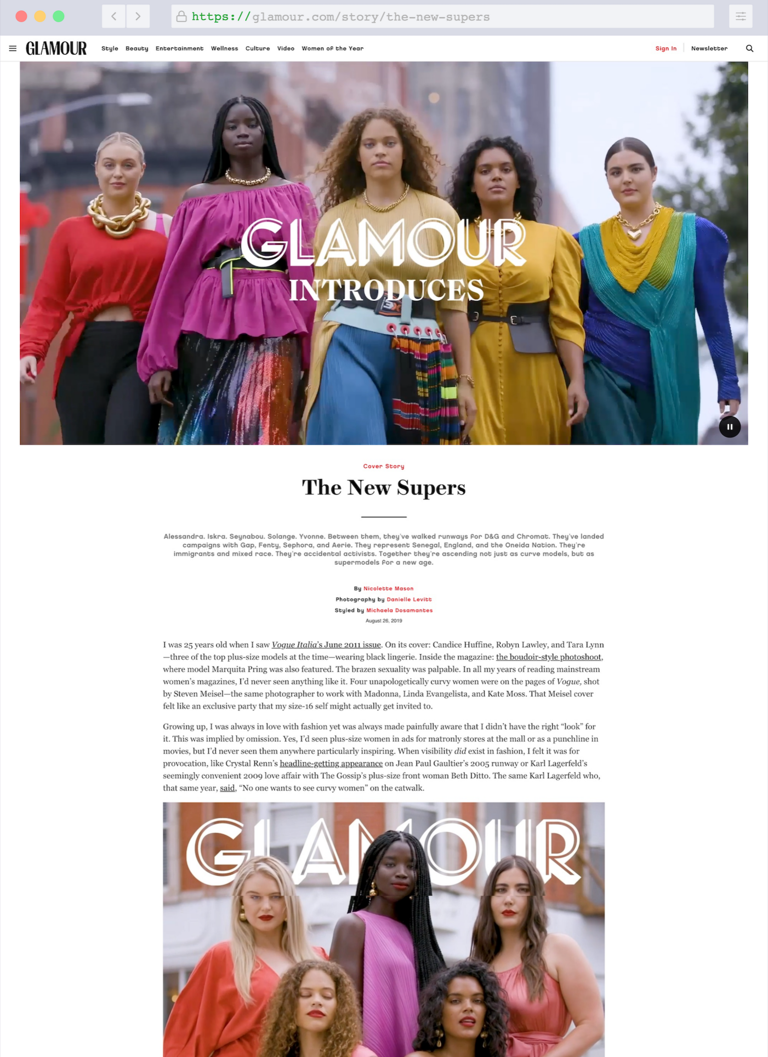

Cover Story

The New Supers

Alessandra. Iskra. Seynabou. Solange. Yvonne. Between them, they've walked runways for D&G and Chromat. They've landed campaigns with Gap, Fenty, Sephora, and Aerie. They represent Senegal, England, and the Oneida Nation. They're immigrants and mixed race. They're accidental activists. Together they're ascending not just as curve models, but as supermodels for a new age.

By Nicolette Mason
Photography by Danielle Levitt
Styled by Michaela Dosamantes
August 26, 2019

I was 25 years old when I saw *Vogue Italia*'s June 2011 issue. On its cover: Candice Huffine, Robyn Lawley, and Tara Lynn—three of the top plus-size models at the time—wearing black lingerie. Inside the magazine: the boudoir-style photoshoot, where model Marquita Pring was also featured. The brazen sexuality was palpable. In all my years of reading mainstream women's magazines, I'd never seen anything like it. Four unapologetically curvy women were on the pages of *Vogue,* shot by Steven Meisel—the same photographer to work with Madonna, Linda Evangelista, and Kate Moss. That Meisel cover felt like an exclusive party that my size-16 self might actually get invited to.

Growing up, I was always in love with fashion yet was always made painfully aware that I didn't have the right "look" for it. This was implied by omission. Yes, I'd seen plus-size women in ads for matronly stores at the mall or as a punchline in movies, but I'd never seen them anywhere particularly inspiring. When visibility *did* exist in fashion, I felt it was for provocation, like Crystal Renn's headline-getting appearance on Jean Paul Gaultier's 2005 runway or Karl Lagerfeld's seemingly convenient 2009 love affair with The Gossip's plus-size front woman Beth Ditto. The same Karl Lagerfeld who, that same year, said, "No one wants to see curvy women" on the catwalk.

The New Supers
ISKRA SEYNABOU ALESSANDRA
SOLANGE YVONNE

From left to right: On Iskra, Mara Hoffman dress; On Seynabou, Pleats Please by Issey Miyake dress; On Alessandra, Kalita maxi dress; On Solange, Zero Maria Cornejo dress; On Yvonne, Cushnie dress; All models are wearing Rebecca de Ravenel earrings.

Eight years later, I've seen progress: Ashley Graham on the cover of *Vogue* in 2017, a whopping 208 curve appearances clocked during the spring 2018 New York Fashion Week shows, and Lizzo becoming a bonafide style star, to name a few examples. But this progress was particularly visible when I walked on the set of a *Glamour* shoot and saw five remarkably striking curvy models getting ready to appear on the cover wearing the same designer clothes any other model would wear. No lingerie, no swimsuits, no shock value.

Seynabou Cissé, **Iskra Lawrence**, **Alessandra Garcia Lorido**, **Yvonne Simone**, and **Solange van Doorn** are powerful, ambitious, and of course, beautiful. But unlike the group that inspired the original supermodel phenomenon of the 1980s and 90s, the new crop are all a size 12 and above. They represent Senegal, England, and the Oneida Nation. They're immigrants and mixed race. They're accidental activists and eating-disorder-awareness advocates. They have professional backgrounds in tech and health sciences. Together they're ascending not just as curve models, but as supermodels for a new age. The New Supers, if you will.

I met these women on a 100-degree day this July in New York City's Chinatown, a bustling, historic neighborhood where—appropriately—old meets new. It was one of the hottest days of the summer, yet all five arrived energized and ready to work. Each had agreed to pose for *Glamour*'s September cover, the marquee piece of a larger package which explores what it's like to be a plus-size woman during this particular cultural moment.

> "They represent England, Senegal, and the Oneida Tribe. They're immigrants and mixed race. They're accidental activists and eating disorder–awareness advocates. *Together they're ascending not just as curve models*, but as supermodels for a new age."

If you're not already familiar with their names, you've likely seen their faces: Garcia Lorido has walked the runway for Dolce & Gabbana, appeared in a campaign for fellow model Emily Ratajkowski's body-conscious essentials line Inamorata, and is featured front and center in Gap's fall 2019 denim commercials. Cissé landed a Sephora campaign and a spot on Christian Siriano's runway. Simone went from *America's Next Top Model* to Chromat's New York Fashion Week show. Van Doorn has modeled Rihanna's lingerie line, Savage x Fenty, and appeared in a lookbook for designer Tanya Taylor. And Lawrence, having been featured in several inclusive campaigns—including a key spot as one of AerieREAL's Role Models—has used her platform to advocate for awareness around diversity in fashion.

None of the five necessarily knew that curve modeling would become their lane, but it's a space where each found a home, one where they'd not only be accepted but be celebrated, though it wasn't always a smooth road. Lawrence, for example, tells me how, having made it to the finals of a local Faces to Watch competition at 14 years old, she felt ridiculed for not fitting into sample sizes. At a gig, she says, another model pulled her aside and told her, "Oh, you know there's something called plus-size modeling?" Until then, she didn't. Same for Cissé, who says "I remember typing out to my friend, 'Oh, wow, modeling is seeming more realistic because I'm in New York and opportunities are here, but I just have to get to a size four and then I'll think about it.' I didn't know that curve modeling was a thing."

It's not just a thing: it's a key part of the plus-size retail industry, which is estimated to be worth $21 billion today and projected to hit more than $100 billion during the next few years due to latent demand.

"I'm fulfilling the fantasy of who I wanted to see in the fashion industry as a child. I know there are other girls out there that are looking for that, so I know it's my space to disrupt." —Alessandra Garcia Lorido

From left to right: On Yvonne, Agmes earrings, Louis Vuitton jacket, Nike sports bra, Aerie bike shorts, and Bump'Air sneakers; On Seynabou, Bottega Veneta necklace, and Christian Siriano dress; On Alessandra, Bottega Veneta necklace, and Christian Siriano gown; On Iskra, Louise Olsen earrings, Marina Rinaldi jacket, Nike sports bra, and Zero Maria Cornejo pant; On Solange, Ming Yu Wang earrings, Louis Vuitton blazer and gilet with embroidered cape, Tibi shorts and Maison Margiela sneakers

How did we get here? During the last five years, the body-positivity movement found its footing, and conversations about it have been catapulted into mainstream media and retail. It's a movement that owes thanks to Instagram style titans and moguls in the making like Gabi Fresh and Nadia Aboulhosn, and rising social media stars like size-24 La'Shaunae Steward. Thanks to greater visibility through mainstream campaigns from Target, Calvin Klein, and JC Penney. Thanks to *Dietland* and *Shrill*, two popular TV shows that featured visibly plus-size leading actresses bringing the fat experience described by authors Sarai Walker and Lindy West to life. To vocal activists sick and tired of the mockery around fat bodies. Thanks to pioneering women of color, like designer Monif C, stylist Susan Moses, and editor Madeline Figueroa Jones, who have worked in this space for decades laying the groundwork for a broader movement. And in a way thanks to that Meisel cover, because now we all know Ashley Graham's name, we've seen Tess Holliday grab magazine covers, and we've watched Precious Lee dominate the runway.

But for all the headline-winning successes, the *I'm No Angel* campaigns, and the calls for increasing visibility, many women have felt, justifiably, that body positivity is exclusionary, that it exists for white women to feel OK about their average bodies, that it's bullshit. Body positivity, at its core, isn't just about making people feel good about themselves (though that's a great side effect, and hopefully one that extends to *all* bodies). It's also not *just* about fashion or *just* about having a positive self-image. Body positivity is about smashing stereotypes, it's about recognizing the innate privilege some bodies hold, and it's about challenging long-held beliefs about what's considered beautiful while promoting real diversity and inclusion.

In many ways, though, fashion's slow but steady adoption of body positivity has validated the cynics: If the Meisel cover was one of the first times body positivity made its way into a high-fashion cover, one of its implied truths was that curvy was okay as long as it was a very specific type of curvy—hourglass, flat stomach, thin face, and above all, white. "White plus bodies are much more acceptable," says Cissé. "It always kills me when I'm at a job and I'm painfully aware that I'm the token person [of color] in the room. That's always hard."

"I feel like when I first started, "curve" meant you can have a big ass and big boobs, but you probably don't have a big belly. And I think I see that changing, which is awesome." —Yvonne Simone From left to right: On Seynabou, Adam Lippes for 11 Honore dress and Hyworks earrings; On Yvonne, Lele Sadoughi earrings, Preen by Thornton Bregazzi for 11 Honore top and skirt; On Iskra, Lele Sadoughi earrings and Veronica Beard dress; On Solange, Lele Sadoughi earrings and Tanya Taylor dress for 11 Honoré; On Alessandra, Joanna Laura Constantine earrings and Kate Spade dress

"I'm a size 12," says Garcia Lorido. "I don't represent girls that are size 22. I don't know what that feels like, and I shouldn't be speaking for them. I shouldn't be representing them. I can represent myself; if they relate, if they are inspired by me, then great."

The next logical question: *Why* don't as many opportunities exist for women over a certain size? Lots of explanations have been thrown around. Some brands might not have the capital to produce samples in extended sizing, while for others there's an insistence that "aspirational" (read "smaller") models are what sells. Some agencies might say clients don't book larger models so it doesn't make sense to rep them. Casting directors could argue that agencies aren't representing or training larger models to compete. Each could be partially responsible for how pervasive an issue this continues to be, and it echoes much of the cultural attitude toward larger bodies, both in and outside of fashion. Without a clear party to be held accountable or take the initiative to continue the evolution of inclusivity, it's challenging to enforce change.

Lawrence understands this well and thinks her light skin, blue eyes, and acceptable curves may have given her access—"I understand that I'm not a marginalized body," she says. "I am an accepted body type and shape and my skin color. And I hope that sometimes people will just use me as a test because they want to go further." Now that she's among the most sought-after—and debated—curve models, she has the leverage to ask clients to push their boundaries a little further too. "I'm trying to open the door and trying to change the system," she says. Not just for clients she works with, but in potential future projects of her own.

"I definitely had long-term plans to just keep doing my office job and never quite fully transition to modeling because I was like, 'This is just going to be a part-time gig. Nobody's looking for curvy girls.' I ended up quitting my job within the first three months." —Seynabou Cissé

From left to right: On Yvonne, Agmes earrings, Louis Vuitton jacket, and Nike sports bra; On Seynabou, Bottega Veneta necklace and Christian Siriano dress; On Alessandra, Bottega Veneta necklace and Christian Siriano gown; On Iskra, Louise Olsen earrings, Marina Rinaldi jacket, and Nike sports bra; On Solange, Ming Yu Wang earrings and Louis Vuitton blazer and gilet with embroidered cape

Some of the New Supers also tell me they're aware of limits around the *type* of work many plus models get: Where straight-size models are generally afforded opportunities within the high-fashion space—elevated campaigns, editorials, and runway work—curve models still tend to be relegated to more commercial jobs. Jobs that often ask them to smile and dance and look downright thrilled, a move I imagine is to make spectators feel more comfortable with an alternative definition of beauty. "I think a lot of times shows with curve models can be marketed or advertised in a different way than high-fashion," says Simone. "It turns into this odd, excessively joyous thing. Why can't we be cool and wear cool clothes and not have to smile down the runway?" Van Doorn too feels that limitation: "As plus-size models, I feel like unless we're doing a test shoot, you don't get to look like some bomb-ass dominatrix dripping in gold. I see the potential in myself, but it's like, Why can't they see that too?"

For Garcia Lorido, even getting a foot in the door was hard to come by, despite being the daughter of actor Andy Garcia. "Back in the day, [magazines] would do interviews with celebrities' kids. I felt like I was never allowed to be in those spaces because they weren't even thinking about it; they were never looking at the 'chunky' daughter of a celebrity ever, *ever*." Now, she says, if publications aren't representing diverse bodies, they're doing a real disservice.

An emphasis on sexuality and fetishism is also a top-of-mind issue for some of the models. "I think I fell into over-sexualizing my body at a very young age," says Lawrence. "I would say almost from the age of 15 because—like I said—I was shunned and body-shamed, and the only validation I found was in having boobs and having curves, and having those celebrated by the male gaze. And the same with photo shoots. Everyone wanted to shoot me in my underwear. I fell into that swimsuit category naturally. People said, 'You can't be an editorial model because A, you have curves, B, you're too smiley and nice.'"

> "
> *Inclusivity* is the future of fashion. You can either get on board or *fade into irrelevance.*

Today it's estimated that 68% of women in America wear plus sizes, generally categorized as a size 14 or higher. Despite being a majority, this community has long been underserved and underrepresented: According to Refinery 29, just 2% of media depictions include plus-size women, where in fashion, only 17% of consumer spending in women's apparel accounts for plus sizes, reports market research group NPD's Consumer Tracking Service. And while representation is important as a social issue, it's also just smart business: According to a recent *Fortune* report, plus-size women spend 20 cents for every dollar that straight-size women spend on clothes—a disparity that puts that missing 80 cents up for grabs to retailers who wise up. Designer Christian Siriano has said he tripled his business when he introduced plus sizes, yet some of the world's most visible brands aren't there yet. But we *are* seeing strides: Van Doorn is set to appear in a campaign for Pink, the sister brand of Victoria's Secret, and its collaboration with indie brand For Love & Lemons. "Of course, [working with VS] is something every model wants to do when they start modeling, and it's obviously rewarding to say I accomplished that," she tells me. "I wanted one of us to conquer this."

But even more dangerous than retailers' fear of fat bodies is the recent swell of opinion pieces that seek to tear down any body-positive strides we've made. In an op-ed for *Vogue Italia* republished by *Business of Fashion* last month, novelist Bret Easton Ellis whined that inclusivity was ruining fashion (yes, in the same magazine that ran the pivotal Meisel cover eight years earlier). In June writer Tanya Gold set the internet ablaze with her clickbaity *Telegraph* takedown of Nike's use of plus-size mannequins in stores. "The new Nike mannequin is not size 12, which is healthy, or even 16—a hefty weight, yes, but not one to kill a woman. She is immense, gargantuan, vast. She heaves with fat," Gold wrote.

As disheartening and painful as it is to read these words, they signal something crucial to me: that some people seem threatened by inclusivity—because it's clearly not going away. I already mentioned the year-over-year uptick of plus models appearing on runways during Fashion Week, and industry favorites like Tanya Taylor, Prabal Gurung, and Veronica Beard are joining the ranks of Christian Siriano and Becca McCharren-Tran's Chromat in offering extended sizing. So for the Golds, Ellises and other critics, I say: Inclusivity is the future in fashion. You can either get on board or fade into irrelevance.

"I so badly want to do a fragrance campaign. I've never seen a plus-size fragrance. Freakin' ever. That's my goal."—Solange van Doorn From left to right: On Iskra, Monies necklace, Marina Rinaldi top, Derek Lam pants, Chromat bra, and Casadei shoes; On Senyabou, Laura Lombardi necklace, Mara Hoffman top, Marina Rinaldi skirt and belt, and Marion Parke shoes; On Solange, Stellar Jewelry necklace and bracelet, Pleats Please by Issey Miyake top, wrap and pants, Chopova Lowena belt, and Miista shoes; On Yvonne, Kenneth Jay Lane necklace, Jonathan Simkhai for 11 Honore dress, Marina Rinaldi belt, and Sophie Webster shoes; On Alessandra, Kenneth Jay Lane necklace, Gucci dress, Pleats Please by Issey Miyake pants, and Derek Lam sandals

To the five models I spent the day with, the most exciting thing about increased visibility is the understanding that each of them is, in their own way, doing important work. And I got to see that proven in real time: As they were posing on a bustling street corner during our shoot, one visibly plus-size woman approached the scene. I watched as she registered the models and—hand to God—starting smiling. A genuine smile. She was clearly inspired by whatever was happening on that steamy corner, and it was palpable. It was impossible for me not to get emotional at that moment.

"I like that I get to inspire my peers—and even inspire myself to be a better person," says Garcia Lorido. "I get to open the wedge into the fashion industry, and make it more open for more diversity." Cissé too revels in the opportunity to be the representation she wishes she'd had as a young dark-skinned girl new to America: "This woman had DM'd me a picture of her five-year-old daughter copying one of my editorial makeup looks. It was like, Wow. Somebody can look at this image and be like, People who look like that can be up there too. I had never walked past [images of] anybody who was my size or my color, so it was just like, *Somebody* thinks this matters."

It's hard to put into words just how incredible it is to be witnessing this precise moment. It's a culmination of decades of work and emotional labor to disrupt the status quo. And it's a moment that allows us to not bat an eye when we realize many of today's supermodels are closer in size and shape to the average woman than the otherworldly glamazons of the '80s and '90s ever were. Those women will always have a place in fashion history, but I think we're inching closer to a new kind of history. There's no question that the work of diversifying the fashion industry is still in its infancy, but there's undeniable momentum behind the progress we're starting to see; hopefully it will continue to inspire a new generation.

"I have a younger brother, and I see his younger friends—especially the girls—that struggle with the same stuff that I struggled with and my friends struggled with 10 years ago, 15 years ago," says Garcia Lorido. "So our job isn't done. The world isn't body positive yet. It takes, I think, more than just the last five years for it to really change."

Still, the women—and I—are hopeful. "I feel like we're progressing and moving forward. We have to be vocal about things we want to see more of. But we also have to remember to celebrate the wins and the small victories." says Lawrence. "I can't promise you that you're [always] going to feel represented. There are billions of people in the world. We can try, but it's almost impossible to represent everyone. So I want people to know if you can't see yourself, you can still be *it*, you can still do *it*. You might need to be that representation."

Nicolette Mason is a fashion writer, influencer, and diversity & inclusion consultant based in Brooklyn, NY. Follow her