FETISHIZING BLACKNESS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONSUMER CULTURE AND BLACK IDENTITY AS PORTRAYED ON BET

A Thesis in
Media Studies
by
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ABSTRACT

This study examines three Black Entertainment Television (BET) shows – *The Black Carpet*, *The Boot* and *Baldwin Hills* – assessing their popularly mediated economic and consumptive representations of Black America in the context of socioeconomic realities being lived in Black America. Using a critical textual analysis of these programs the thesis explores the extent to which consumers are being sold a mediated version of the American dream and Black identity through commodity fetishism, and argues that this symbolic construction has a hegemonic function by deterring the Black consumer’s attention from real to imaginary economic lifestyles. This study finds that, although the three programs differ on their levels of ideological intensity and specific characteristics, on BET as a whole blackness is a fetishized commodity, conflating cultural and consumer identities, while at the same time concealing the significant inequalities that many members of their audience may be experiencing.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In modern consumer culture, mass-manufactured commodities take on culturally significant meanings. A product’s packaging, a day of shopping or even a much-hyped Super Bowl commercial are just a few examples of the consumerist phenomena that influence the creation of social meanings around commodities. As a result, we more often purchase products for their intangible qualities of social and identity-defining values than for their actual use-values (Andersen, 1995; McAllister, 2008). Commodities are fetishized in this sense: their meanings are elevated beyond their material characteristics, even to the point of having “magical” attributes (Williams, 1980).

In order to understand if and how these fetishized messages are able to circulate through our complex culture, we must first attempt to understand the different sociocultural contexts of the receivers, or at least how commodity fetishism interacts with other forms of social identity creation. Therefore, academic scholarship must analyze key elements of identity such as age, gender, sexuality, class, race and ethnicity that also play critical roles in the cultural meanings of consumption.

Some researchers have done this. They analyze contemporary consumption as a vehicle through which social inequalities, like race, class and gender are formed, experienced, imposed, and resisted (Chin, 2001; Belk, 1995; Carrier & Heyman, 1997). These scholars assert that cultures of consumption should be analyzed in their greater historical, economic, political and social contexts. This means taking into account the implications of things like historical power and oppression, for instance. These researchers ask a highly significant, but often-overlooked question: What is the relationship between specific versions of social inequality and...
consumption? The purpose of my study is to ask and then expand on this same question in regards to images of African American consumption on the cable television network Black Entertainment Television (BET).

This thesis examines if and how programming created for Black audiences distorts and/or ignores socioeconomic and historical circumstances in exchange for a mantra of consumption that is void of social context. By observing three shows on Black Entertainment Television (BET) - The Black Carpet, Baldwin Hills and The Boot - this research aims to determine if there exists a disconnect between the popularly mediated economic and consumptive representations of Black America, and the actual economic realities being lived in Black America. Using a critical textual analysis of this programming it will analyze the extent to which consumers are being sold fantasies of the American dream and Blackness through commodity fetishism, and argue that this symbolic construction has a hegemonic function by deterring the Black consumer’s attention from real to imaginary economic lifestyles. The central intention of this work is to determine how the theoretical concept of commodity fetishism intersects with issues of identity in the context of contemporary African American popular culture. This first chapter will survey the specific social contexts of contemporary Black Americans such as socioeconomic factors to situate the combination of identity and consumption faced by this particular group as well as provide background information on BET and its political economy. The introduction concludes with a preview of the thesis chapters that follow.

**Socioeconomic Realities and Idealized Consumption in the Black Community**

In 2006, 40% of America’s Black households brought in $25,000 or less in annual income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009, table 668). In fact, in Table 1-1, which breaks household income down to seven economic groups, we find the largest percentage of African Americans fall
into the “Under $15,000” category (24.4%). While there is not one simple explanation for such circumstances, certain foundational elements are believed to be involved.

Wellesley College professor Marcellus Andrews (1999) explains that the racial poverty differential boils down to the collaborating duo of racism and capitalism. While racism still clearly remains in existence, its impact is now more so its legacy of oppression and de facto role in shaping particular, but key, elements of society.

Table 1-1


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number of households (1,000)</th>
<th>Percent distribution</th>
<th>Median income (dollars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Under $15,000</td>
<td>$15,000-$24,999</td>
<td>$25,000-$34,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All households</td>
<td>116,011</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>94,705</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>14,354</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian &amp; Pacific Islander</td>
<td>4,454</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>12,973</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This legacy is in great part attributable to the social power and value of whiteness in America. Whiteness is a socially constructed ideology “that has historically provided different
means of access to economic and social status in societies produced through European colonization” (Takaki, 1987 as cited in Mayer, 2005, p. 154). Because only European colonialists had authorship in defining America and who or what is American, Whiteness, or things associated with being White, has been put in a default position of being standard – or the norm; anything falling outside of this norm is ‘Other’. For example, history as told by most textbooks and many teachers is relayed from the standpoint of Whiteness; hence, non-White races surface primarily when there is a deliberate need for them. This marginalized lens on history often goes unrealized, because it is packaged and assumed as normative. Black History Month was created with the intent of taking another standpoint toward America’s past.

It is important to distinguish between white skin - or having the pigment that has been labeled as white - and Whiteness - the discourse rooted in history that continues to manifest institutionally and ideologically. To be aware of Whiteness is not to be negative toward those with white skin. In fact, aspects of Whiteness manifest apart from the Caucasian body in many ways, like social attitudes, individual behaviors or even in the consumer market. Also, Whiteness translates differently among people having white skin. For instance, American society also assumes as default maleness (patriarchy), middle and upper class wealth, and heterosexuality, to name just a few. As a result, women, the lower and working classes and homosexuals have been automatically Othered, and have faced major uphill battles to challenge these dynamics.

According to Valerie M. Babb (1998, p. 42) Whiteness persists because it is an invisible norm, and therefore hegemonic:

…Whiteness is imbued with privileged authority through political, economic, and cultural means. Restricting who can vote, own property, or serve on juries; inhibiting access to the means of capitalistic production; filling cultural institutions with representations only of whites and allowing those images to dominate literary, visual, and performing arts all generate a spontaneous, if subconscious, recognition of the supremacy of whiteness and sanction the perception that whites intrinsically have more right to what is American than do other groups in the United States.
The historical privileges of Whiteness are difficult to deny when we look at the significant economic gaps between Whites and non-Whites. Shapiro and Kenty-Drane (2005) explain that overcoming the wealth disparities between races is difficult systematically, because of invisible institutional barriers. For example, federal tax, transportation and housing policies, which favor those with more established incomes have resulted in residential segregation and underserved neighborhoods that are heavily concentrated with minorities (Shapiro & Kenty-Drane, p. 176). These problems are further perpetuated by predatory lending practices, mortgage discrimination and insufficient public services, i.e. fire stations, hospitals, police and schools.

Scholars like Shapiro and Kenty-Drane (2005) suggest wealth and net worth measurements are best for assessing the long-term impacts of the oppressive systems of White patriarchal capitalism. They explain that while income is a measure of recent economic circumstances, net worth shows families’ accumulations of wealth throughout generations based on savings, earnings and inheritances (Shapiro & Kenty-Drane, 2005). Figure 1-1 (data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2009, table 699) shows the extreme wealth disparities between the nation’s White and non-White populations in 2004. The median net wealth for Whites ($140,700) was nearly six times that of non-Whites ($24,800). The mean net wealth measurement for Whites ($561,800) was three and a half times the mean net wealth of non-Whites ($153,100).
A more salient factor in the critical state of African Americans, says Andrews (1999), is capitalism. Modern capitalism has led the United States toward an information and technology based economy, which demands academic specificities that are less attainable to those minorities who are prevented from getting educational advantages because of the continued legacies of capitalist oppression, including slavery and Jim Crow laws. After centuries of being (legally) denied the right to quality and higher education and being forced to do subservient work, this group has a lot of catching up to do, even after attaining equal legal rights. Now, while many celebrate the United States' superlative advancements in the 21st century, African Americans “remain an industrial labor force in” what is now “a post-industrial country” (Andrews, p. 28). Under the status quo-centric presidency of Ronald Reagan, the U.S. economy redirected – leaving
behind many minorities who were unable to afford education including denying them necessary vocational training (Wilson, 1997). According to Andrews (p. 3), the groundbreaking crusade toward civil rights during the 50s, 60s and 70s was quashed in the 80s “by free markets and the technological whirlwind driving capitalism worldwide rather than by organized racism per se”. The African Americans hit hardest by these foundational changes became unemployed or found low-wage jobs.

Like the high quality of life inheritances that are handed down between generations in upper- and middle-class families, these underclass kids also receive an inheritance – in the form of poverty. They attend low-income area schools and are at high risk of dropping out. Some opt to take low-wage jobs to help their families, and therefore lose out on education and other important resources “including decent-quality housing, schooling, health care, or education that can break the cycle of poverty and dependency” (Andrews, 1999, p. 28) thus perpetuating the cycle. The racism which our parents and grandparents witnessed, endured and partook in was much different than what it is today. Today, class inequality is the manifestation of an institutionalized racism.

For the 40% of Black homes living on less than $25,000 annually, the aspirations for health care, better than adequate shelter and familial, financial and emotional stability, are handicapped by a chronic cycle that spans American history. As will be explained in Chapter Two, the works of scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) help to place economic inheritances in even greater post-colonial contexts, specifically in that the Black community was given emancipation from slavery in exchange for a system of forced and industrialized debt known as sharecropping.

Popularly mediated constructions of African American identity may exacerbate these existing social ills. The construction of identity around consumption, no matter what the group, is culturally problematic. But, the financial resources of many African Americans make consumerist
ideology even more threatening. Such resources are not sufficient enough to allow this large
demographic to indulge in the consumerism being sold as an essential part of their cultural
identity – at least, to indulge without a severe economic consequence that may perpetuate the
existing cycles of oppression.

For example, in the 2002 book, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in
African American Culture*, Bakari Kitwana deconstructs the spectrum of problems that manifest
within the Black post-civil rights generations. Kitwana specifically highlights the ills of the hip
hop generation, which he recognizes as Black Americans born between 1965 and 1984, as
attestations to cultural phenomena spanning several decades. He suggests many of this group’s
behaviors, which are in fact deemed unacceptable by many in the Black community, stem from
the frustrations of having always existed as social, political and economic outcasts in their own
society. One implication that feeds these frustrations is “the distance between the American
dream as presented in the mass media and the degree to which it is increasingly unattainable for
most Americans” (Kitwana, 2002, p. 43). One version of this American Dream is in mediated
culture targeted for, or predominantly featuring, African Americans. Regardless of individuals’
socioeconomic circumstances, Black popular culture holds an authoritative position in this
society. However, in spite of this power, urban entertainment and its corporate governance appear
to ignore or even exploit the inherent contradictions in perpetuating unabashed commodity
fetishism.

Kitwana even suggests that many hip hop consumers, from every class, actually feel
entitled to elaborate wealth and the ostentatious trinkets that come with it based on what they
have witnessed as norms of the culture (Kitwana, 2002). These materialistic constructed identities
aimed essentially at Black youth culture take attention away from the underlying sociopolitical
issues that are devastating the race, and arguably contribute to the group’s own disorganization.
While it is beneficial, to some degree, for minorities to find motivation for exceeding the bounds
of capitalism, the lure of flashy materialism and a collective identity forming around such materialism only sets the majority of these consumers up for disappointment, for it disregards the weight of the dynamics at hand and exploits their desires to move beyond the quicksand of capitalism. This materialism merely sells the fantasy of a quick “fix” to consumers’ financial problems and calls no attention to structural issues like inequalities in education, student loan distribution and career training.

Rap music and its videos have been most notably criticized for indoctrinating a population motivated by consumerism. Take for example Jay-Z’s 2002 release, “03 Bonnie and Clyde”, which devotes an entire verse to strictly high-fashion name dropping:

I keep you workin’ that Hermes Burkin bag/
Manolo Blahnik, Timbs/ aviator lens/
600 drops/ Mercedes Benz/
The only time you wear Burberry to swim/
(Carter, 2002)

As Ryan Berger of Havas’ Euro RSCG Worldwide says, "These brands are part of the artists' lives, and what they're selling is a lifestyle" (Stanley, 2004). However, despite the natural appeal of the jewelry, mansions, luxury cars and wardrobes flaunted in such lyrics and music videos, these commodities are unconventional luxuries to a large percentage of hip hop consumers. So while these commercial promotions may be legitimate components of these entertainers' lifestyles, the dynamics change once moved from private life into the public sphere of performance and bravado via albums and videos; it ultimately becomes a celebrated lifestyle being sold as a commodity. As best stated by Kitwana (p. 44, 2002), “the daily images of an America that many of us don’t experience are shoved down our throats through consumer culture. This only heightens the sense of powerlessness that many young hip hop generationers feel”.

Consumer culture has reached into and altered the logic of exhibition on television, as well. Sasha Torres (2005) says, when it comes to race the television medium is currently at a point of metamorphosis. Today we are seeing less of the conventional forms of racism, like
stereotyping and exclusion. “Instead, the dominant mode of television’s racism now lies in the ways its representations tend to wrench persons of color out of the still pervasive political context of White dominance and out of the still-relevant social context of communities of color” (Torres, pp. 406-407). As a result, “real political, social, and economic inequalities” are fetishized, or disappear (Torres, pp. 406-407). “In their place, television offers up racialized figures as consumers first and last, producing a powerful if misleading alibi both for existing racial formations and for capitalism itself” (Torres, pp. 406-407). One major source for racial television images is the cable network Black Entertainment Television (BET), and is the focus of this thesis. The next section establishes the background of BET.

**Black Entertainment Television (BET)**

Black Entertainment Television (BET) was the brainchild of Robert “Bob” Louis Johnson, a man regarded by many as one of the most important African American entrepreneurs in the history of the United States. BET’s initial success afforded Johnson recognition amid much of the Black community as the ideal manifestation of Black capitalism. To some, Johnson was the torchbearer of minority entrepreneurship’s successful penetration of White hegemonic late-capitalism. In 2000 he made history by becoming the first African American billionaire. By 2009 Johnson had a net worth of $550 million (Miller, 2009). Brett Pulley (2004) describes the mogul as a “modern-day Citizen Kane ”...he is a man with a charming personality, “but beneath the surface is singularly focused, icy, and relentless in his pursuit of profits” (p. 8). Johnson’s conceptualization and engineering of the African American-centric television channel set the tone for much of the ethical debate that would plague the network for decades: commodify the Black audience to the capitalist market first and worry about social responsibility later. Therefore, the story of Black Entertainment Television must be told by first understanding the story of its
Robert Johnson

Robert Johnson is no stranger to the socioeconomic hardships that many African Americans have experienced. In fact, he was raised in the rural Illinois town of Freeport at a time when most of its Black residents worked industrial factory jobs and had limited access to economic and educational resources (Pulley, 2004, p. 14). Because of the cultural exclusions ingrained in mid-20th century society, Johnson, like many racial and class minorities, was uninformed of the basic how-tos of college, i.e. how to get into, apply for or even pay for it. As a result, most Freeport minorities at the time did not envisage academics beyond high school, and early on, accepted the fate of following their parents’ footsteps toward local blue-collar careers (Pulley). Others looked to athletics and the military for ways out of their hometown.

Luckily for Johnson, his interactions with the majority White community and high school established in him a uniquely comfortable disposition that would foreground his future abilities to successfully maneuver within the hegemony (Pulley, 2004). With the aid of guidance counselors and friends Johnson applied and was accepted to the University of Illinois, which he paid for by working and borrowing student loans (Pulley). This was followed with a master’s degree from Princeton and eventually a career in Washington, D.C., working with companies such as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Urban League and Capital Hill (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2008; Pulley, 2004). During his tenure with these powerhouses Johnson mastered his networking skills and created corporate connections that would be imperative to launching his future network.

In 1976, while working as press secretary for Congressman Walter Fauntroy, Johnson saw the frustrations of Black legislatures who felt that the mass media virtually ignored issues of
importance to minority audiences and lacked a fair medium for mass dissemination. He described for Fauntroy what he conceived as an educational television network intended to fill the democratic void in Black America (Pulley, 2004). However, after taking a position as a lobbyist with the National Cable Television Association (NCTA) Johnson’s interactions with more capitalistically charged associates steered him away from social and political paths toward the corporate path (Pulley). It was at this point that Johnson realized the profit potential of a cable television network that targeted the long ignored African American demographic. Although his initial vision may have also included more democratically inclusive goals, his commercial motive for such a company was nevertheless repeated in unequivocal language from its inception. According to Johnson, the goal was “to make BET the predominant source for advertisers to reach the Black consumer” (Pulley, p. 59). As argued below, this goal converged with trends in niche marketing and media.

**Niche Marketing & Narrowcasting**

Just as Johnson was conceptualizing a tool for penetrating the Black consumer market the burgeoning cable industry was in need of novel approaches for expanding. The medium achieved this expansion by exploring its potential as a “narrowcasting, niche” medium. According to Joseph Turow (1997), niche marketing exploits America’s existing cultural divisions that laid the grounds for many societal tensions, such as gender or race. In post-World War II America advertisers were greatly influenced by the expanding middle class as well as the redefined cultural identities that arose from social movements. They came to reason that mass marketing might be most effective when appealing to audiences in the spaces in which they feel most secure and at ease – in their own cultural and/or economic comfort zones. By building on and subdividing these comfort zones - or social spaces - mass marketing could prevent consumers
from having to venture into any cultural atmosphere where hints of social tensions may inhibit their purchasing (Turow).

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the mass communications industries shifted from “society-making media,” which encourages interaction among different social groups, toward “segment-making media,” which encourages interaction within segmented social groups (Turow, 1997). However, the segmented social groups were no longer distinguished only by the traditional demographic categories of race and ethnicity. Instead, these were combined with more contemporary demographic measures like class, geography, gender, generation and more, giving advertisers a plethora of profiles called ‘lifestyles’ (Turow).

Overall, advertisers had to find new ways of mass-marketing to the people living these various consumer lifestyles. One solution was narrowcasting – a strategy from cable networks that targeted desirable niche audiences through the use of lifestyle specific programming (Mullen, 2003; Smith-Shomade, 2008). Cable gained much of its success as a result of narrowcasting; we see today that almost any thematic interest that is shared in popular culture can be transposed into a cable format.

Narrowcasting couples naturally with target or niche marketing. Communications scholar Patrick Parsons explains that while cable started out as just moderately segmented it ultimately grew into the “medium of the niche” with new channels catering to unique niche groups (Hill, 2008, p. 19). In fact, by 2008 the average American home received 104 channels – an increase of 70 percent since 2000 - the average viewer, however, actually watched only 16 (Lieberman, 2007). Amid such stiff competition cable channels have to distinctly brand themselves to attract the niche lifestyles they and their advertisers want. This transition of cable into a “niche” medium was even evident in its early days, and was a key characteristic in the creation of BET.
BET’s Beginnings

Midway through the 1970s, executives at the leading cable companies – the largest being John Malone’s TeleCommunication Inc. (TCI) – were looking at opportunities for large-scale expansion beyond rural communities and into metropolitan areas (Pulley, 2004). Providers offering new variety channels such as the TBS Superstation, C-SPAN and HBO had the best potential for gaining a sizable urban subscription base; however, minorities saw very few incentives in purchasing cable. This proved especially problematic for TCI as it won contracts in minority-majority cities like Memphis, Tennessee (Pulley, 2004). Robert Johnson scrapped his original idea of a cable channel that would serve the democratic needs of the Black community and adjusted it to capitalize on the economic opportunity that he saw through Malone and the developing cable industry. In 1979, Johnson assembled the Black Entertainment Television (BET) network. He laid out the following trio of business goals for the conception and operation of his new company:

1. To become the dominant medium used by advertisers to target the Black consumer marketplace,

2. To become the dominant medium engaged in the production and distribution of quality Black-oriented entertainment and information to cable television households, and

3. To use the powers of the medium to contribute to the cultural and social enrichment of the network’s viewing audience (Smith-Shomade, 2008, pp. 43-44).

Johnson took out a $15,000 bank loan plus a $15,000 consulting contract from the NCTA to launch his project – but he obtained the bulk of the steep startup financing through connections he had established as a lobbyist (Pulley, 2004). He inked a large deal with John Malone. TCI gave Johnson a $320,000 loan, purchased 20% of BET for $180,000 and also a seat on the BET board (BET’s First Quarter Century, 2005; Pulley, 2004, pp. 40-41). However, these deals instigated
some backlash, for Johnson has been highly criticized by his Black competitors for his initial and periodic usage of non-minority finances to establish and enhance his company; as for the network it is labeled as a token frontage that was given an unfair advantage (Pulley, 2004). Throughout the network’s first 25 years Johnson sold off several minority stakes to major corporations in efforts to expand various resources, including Taft Broadcasting and Time, Inc's HBO.

In 1991, he made an initial public offering of the company’s stock and began trading on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) – the first Black owned company to do so; in 1998, Johnson partnered with Liberty Media Group to purchase it for private ownership; and of course BET’s largest deal came in 2000 when it was sold in its entirety for $2.33 billion to Viacom (BET’s First Quarter Century, 2005; Pulley, 2004; Smith-Shomade, 2008). Johnson’s decisions were often made after receiving financial council from his mentor and associate, John Malone, and while Johnson maintained more than 50% stock to remain the majority owner his competition saw his game as underhanded. He marketed BET to advertisers, cable providers and the public as a Black business that should be supported by the Black community, while simultaneously the company advanced by using economic resources that had little investment in the Black community (Pulley, 2004).

**The Political Economy of BET**

In the years between 1994 and 2004 the American media industry consolidated at an unprecedented level resulting in an oligopoly ruled by six major transnational conglomerations: Time Warner, Inc.; The Walt Disney Company, General Electric; Viacom; CBS Corporation and News Corporation (Kunz, 2006). By 2008, these Big Six governed virtually every mass medium and therefore can be considered primary apparatuses of cultural production. According to Douglas Gomery (1998) the media oligopoly retains its hegemonic rule by increasing their
market powers through economic domination and harnessing barriers to entry. Of course, the massive deregulation unleashed by the 1996 Telecommunications Act also deserves a great deal of credit (to say the least) in maintaining the oligopolistic system. Yet, while the Black Entertainment Network had the pride of being an independent and minority-owned firm, these qualities had to be resigned in order to usher African American enterprise into the corporate hegemony.

In May 2000, Viacom’s CEO Sumner Redstone (ranked number 66 on 2008 Forbes 400 list with net worth of $5.1 billion) finalized the landmark acquisition of the CBS Corporation for $37.3 billion through his private holding company, National Amusements, Inc. (Bettig & Hall, 2003; Bettig, 2007; Kunz, 2006; Pulley, 2004; Miller & Greenberg, 2008). That same month, Redstone invited Robert Johnson to discuss a possible business arrangement between BET and Viacom (Pulley). BET appealed to Redstone for many reasons: it could round out the array of niches that Viacom’s holdings already brought in, it had proven longevity and stability as the first and only cable network for the Black demographic, and aside from demographics it was one of few cable stations that had maintained full distribution and significant revenue (Pulley, pp. 187-188). Johnson had initially conceived of a symbiotic partnership that consisted of Viacom purchasing a portion of BET in exchange for financial support (Pulley). However, Redstone persuaded Johnson and his partners into a full acquisition worth $2.3 billion in Viacom stock plus BET's $600 million debt for a grand total of nearly $3 billion (Pulley). Although Johnson would no longer own the channel he would remain CEO for five years with Deborah Lee as second in command. Interestingly, despite Johnson becoming the second largest single shareholder of Viacom stock he was not given a seat in the corporation’s boardroom (Pulley). Some deemed Redstone’s restricting Johnson from the directorate – and therefore the boardroom of the oligopoly – as an insult. However, Johnson said he was fine with the decision and explained that “he was already on five boards and that Viacom had one Black director, William Gray, head of
the United Negro College Fund. ‘I’m pretty boarded out’” (Pulley, p. 192).

**Political economic incentives.**

By joining the Viacom family, and therefore the media oligopoly, BET tapped into the wealth of incentives that are inherent in conglomeration, which according to Gomery (1998), include cross-subsidization, reciprocity, horizontal and vertical integration, and synergy. Cross-subsidization – or the enabling of a media corporation with “interests in a number of media markets to take profits from a thriving area to prop up another less financially successful area” – serves BET significantly in this venture (Gomery, p. 178). Due to the long-standing indifference toward the Black television market BET had always lacked competitive leverage with advertisers. According to Viacom Chief Operating Officer Mel Karmazin, advertising sales figures before the buyout reveal that the network offered, or was forced by the market to offer, ad rates so low that they were arguably discriminatory (Pulley, 2004). While a 30-second ad reaching the MTV audience of 70 million homes sold for $8,000, 30-second ads aired to BET’s audience of 62 million homes sold for $1,500 (Pulley, p. 194). However, the newly acquired channel’s placement within the Viacom cable package allowed advertising fees to be cross-subsidized with networks like MTV generating a significant increase in advertising sales and revenues (Pulley).

Another incentive, reciprocity, as defined by Gomery (1998, p. 178), “enables Hollywood media conglomerates to choose to whom they will sell and then only deal with those companies that cooperate with other units of the media conglomerate”. Reciprocity is most commonly exhibited by the assignment of an exchange value to exclusive informal social processes (Mosco, 1998). Hence, major media mergers and acquisitions are valuable for their potential economic and social relationships in addition to their capital values. Fusfeld (1988) lists the three most salient types of informal ties connecting the economic powers in large firms: corporate interest groups, interlocking directorates and trade associations. BET’s initiation into Viacom was its access point into each of these, but most notably interlocking directorates. In 2004, Viacom
maintained 17 board members, most of which sat on other boards, resulting in a network of interlocking directorates that spanned the private sector (They Rule, 2004). For instance, Viacom board member William H. Gray, III was, at the time, a member of a total of eight major corporate directorates, including Pfizer, J.P. Morgan Chase and Electronic Data Systems (They Rule). One of Mr. Gray’s cohorts in the Electronic Data Systems boardroom was Dr. Judith Rodin, who also sat on the board of the nation’s largest cable provider, Comcast - obviously an ideal ally for a company like Viacom (They Rule, 2004).

This minor example demonstrates how interlocking directorates provide executives with ample access to other established conglomerates where they may informally push their interests. According to some economists, one key danger of interlocking directorates and corporate interest groups is that their daily bartering may facilitate the concentration of ownership that easily reproduces the dominant order (Mosco, p. 189). A 2003 study by Aaron Moore showed that Disney, News Corporation, Viacom and Time Warner - four companies thought to be one another’s greatest competitors - were all linked by 45 interlocking directorates (as cited in Bagdikian, 2004, p. 9). And in 2004 the media oligopoly consisted of five conglomerates, which together had 141 joint ventures such as cable systems, publications and satellite channels, which prompts questions about how competitive free enterprise really is if businesses have shared interests (as cited in Bagdikian, 2004, p. 9).

Vertical and horizontal integration are also ways for large conglomerates to leverage their power. From 2000 to 2006 the CBS Corporation and Viacom maintained a merger that was very notable for its vertical integration – “owning both the content and conduits to distribute that content” (McChesney, 2004, p. 180). For instance, the conglomerate could keep almost all costs in-house by producing a film with Paramount Pictures, renting it through Blockbuster video stores and syndicating it on CBS television affiliates. Viacom is also considerably horizontally integrated – “when firms acquire additional business units at the same level of production,
distribution, or exhibition” (Kunz, 2006). With BET’s induction into Viacom’s MTV Networks group, the channel inherited access to technology, talent, information, content, etc. from cable’s leading music and youth oriented networks, which all happened to be owned by Viacom (BET’s former competition): MTV, MTV2, VH1, VH1 Soul, Country Music Television, The Box, Nickelodeon, Comedy Central, Spike TV, to name a few (The National Entertainment State, 2006).

Conglomerations benefit from vertical and horizontal integration by reducing economies of scale through the use of synergy. According to Eileen Meehan (2005, p. 89), “synergy is the series of tactics employed by transindustrial media conglomerates to multiply revenue streams and decrease costs by creating and feeding internal markets.” Meehan (p. 89) further explains that contemporary synergy is dependent on deregulation and transindustrial conglomeration so that contracts and costs may be held in-house. As a result, a corporation may conceptualize one product - such as a television program - and recycle it throughout their multiple venues.

Synergy as a political economic incentive is perhaps best exemplified through Disney. In fact, Robert McChesney (2004) regards Disney as having turned synergy into an art form. Disney’s original television show, Hannah Montana exemplifies the phenomenon. The franchise builds on a fundamental contrivance of Hannah Montana, who is the celebrity alter ego of Miley Stewart/Miley Cyrus. The Hannah Montana brand was tapped into countless branches of the horizontally and vertically integrated conglomerate. Between 2006 and 2008: the Disney Channel increased the show’s timeslots to seven days per week; Disney Music Group (which houses Hollywood, Walt Disney and Lyric Street Record companies) released nearly a dozen Hannah Montana and/or Miley Cyrus albums; Cyrus and her alter ego got top airplay on Radio Disney; Cyrus made featured guest appearances on several Disney Channel shows and TV movies, like The Emperor’s New School and High School Musical 2; Walt Disney Pictures produced and distributed a 3-D motion picture of Hannah Montana’s concert tour and filmed a feature length

Disney is not the only media conglomerate trying to expand corporate synergy. In early 2007, BET and its sister company Nickelodeon (also known as Nick) embarked on a synergistic partnership in which each dually broadcast two of Nick’s original series, *Just Jordan* and *Romeo!* (“Nickelodeon and BET”, 2007). Both shows were created for Nickelodeon’s African American adolescent demographic and by ushering them over to BET Viacom simultaneously recruited the upcoming generation of consumers to the Black network. *Just Jordan* was created to have an urban flare, for it takes place in South Los Angeles, and stars teen comedian/actor Lil’ JJ who started his entertainment career on BET’s *Coming to the Stage* (“Nickelodeon and BET”). In 2006, Nickelodeon’s other urban themed show *Romeo!* charted as the number one program for Black audiences in the 2-11 age range and was one of the highest ranked among Black tweens – ages 9-14 (“Nickelodeon and BET”). *Romeo!* stars the father and son rappers Master P. and Lil’ Romeo, respectively. The show centers around Romeo, “a mischievous kid with one thing on his mind...going platinum” as a major hip hop artist with the support of his single father who is also a music executive (“Nickelodeon and BET”, ¶6). *Just Jordan* and *Romeo!* may be Nickelodeon originals, but they are especially beneficial to BET because they compensate for its lack of first-run cable programming while remaining in-step with BET’s stand-up comedy and hip hop music programs.

For the most part, the above techniques provide great benefits to the major media firms’ many subsidiaries. However, this apparently was not the case for the Viacom/CBS merger from 1999. Instead, board members grew dissatisfied when CBS and Infinity staggered behind the powerhouses like MTV and Paramount and stocks began to stall (Sweeting, p. 1). In 2006,
Chairman Redstone opted to divide the company into two: CBS Corp. and Viacom (Sweeting). In terms of political economic dynamics, though, because these corporate entities remain under the control of the same man, Sumner Redstone – through National Amusements, Inc. – the concentration of media power is unchanged, and Kunz (2006) argues that the disunion’s impact on the BET network was minimal.

The African American community was divided regarding Robert Johnson’s selling of BET to the Viacom conglomerate in 2000, with some regarding it as selling out while others disagreed to various extents. This ambiguity stems from some of the fundamental binaries that the channel has created for itself. One media scholar, Beretta Smith-Shomade, even gave her book on BET the double entendre title, *Pimpin’ Ain’t Easy: Selling Black Entertainment Television* (2008). She explains her analogy between BET and pimping: “Within hip hop, the pimp returns as a metaphor for the African American man thinking about business and women”. Her book title “resembles BET because of its duplicitous nature – offering customers and audiences both the love and the slap at the same time” (p. xix). Smith-Shomade argues that BET broke new ground by advancing the tactic of economically exploiting the Black diaspora, long after their formal emancipation from the exploitative system, by auctioning the Black consumer to the highest bidder.

What receives only limited mention is the strengthening link between representation entertainment, and commodity construction and production. The embrace of and attempt to flip the commodification of human beings as a sign of Black progress resonates in the building and branding of Black Entertainment Television. One hundred and forty-four years ago, it was called slavery; in 2007, they call it business (Smith-Shomade, 2008, p. 70).

Given the socioeconomic dynamics of African Americans, the messages of consumption they face, and the role of BET as a cable network targeting them, and as part of a larger media conglomerate, this thesis will explore a few of the ways that African American identity is linked to mediated images of consumption on BET.
This thesis will use the information in this first chapter as context for the resulting analysis of programs on BET. Chapter Two establishes the theoretical framework by coherently combining commodity fetishism and theories of Black identity and representation. From this theoretical orientation, this chapter establishes consumption as embedded in everyday politics that ultimately intersect with the capitalist ideology in which consumer culture is generated. Chapter Three provides a methodological detailing of the thesis research. This includes descriptions of the sample, the textual analysis as the research method and details of the research process. Chapter Four is the critical textual analysis of BET’s entertainment/programming content from a sample of three shows, *The Black Carpet*, *Baldwin Hills* and *The Boot* – excluding advertising, marketing or any other promotional material. Ultimately, this chapter deconstructs the dominant discourses in the text and groups them according to systematic themes focusing on identity and consumption representations. Chapter Five is a critical textual analysis of the advertising, marketing and promotional material within the sample and, similar to the previous chapter, organizes conceptual themes within those texts. Chapter Six, which concludes the thesis, summarizes the study, including discussing limitations and offering my thoughts on the results. It provides a look at the relationships between the sample’s entertainment content and promotional content, and the implications of these findings on lower-income and poor Black Americans.
Chapter 2

COMMODITY FETISHISM, BLACK IDENTITY & THE IDEOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework underpinning this thesis consists of two major components: commodity fetishism and Black identity. This chapter reviews salient literature for each component individually, however both are discussed in the ideological context of consumer culture. Ultimately, this section establishes the context in which the BET data will be analyzed.

Consumer Culture

Consumer culture is the larger context that frames many of the issues this project addresses. McAllister (2008, pp. 954-955) defines consumer culture as “the creation and cultivation of self- and social- meaning from the marketing, purchase and display of commodified goods… that includes the symbolic qualities attributed to mass-produced goods, brand logos, product packaging, advertising campaigns, retail spaces, shopping activities and consumption-centered media content”. Consumer culture in advanced capitalism, from a broad historical perspective, is still a relatively young phenomenon only substantially materializing during and after mass industrialization (McAllister, 2008). The early 20th century, for mainstream society, was a time marked by many social transitions – notably, traditional societal apparatuses and institutions such as the homogeneous-based community were becoming “unsettled” while simultaneously, commercial symbols became universally circulated and understood, offering cultural consistency (McAllister). In fact, some scholars even suggest that the genesis of modern consumer culture actually helped transition parts of the nation into the early 20th century by
reducing possible social and psychological trauma during this time of social upheaval (Cross, as cited in McAllister, 2008). On the other hand, other scholars, such as Stuart Ewen, argue that the introduction of consumer culture ultimately was hegemonic in that it helped to solve mass capitalism’s dual problems of over-production and labor alienation by encouraging consumption and hope with the promising implications of product branding and acquisition (Ewen, as cited in McAllister, 2008).

Several fundamental components accompanied the rise of consumer culture and are still powerful components of its current manifestation in modern Western capitalism (McAllister, 2008). First is branding, where marketing techniques generate symbolic trustworthiness and social worth in material goods. Second, advertising, and a media system funded by and structured around advertising, plays the indispensable role of distributing and creating the messages of branding, and inculcating people as consumers. The separation of work and leisure – with the subsequent celebration of the latter -- and the rise of a large middle class with an assumption of disposable income are also characteristic (McAllister). Another major component was and is the encouragement of shopping as a pleasurable experience on its own rather than just a task of necessity.

Many concepts of critical theory have arisen out of deconstructions of consumer culture and its influence upon and synergy with our mass media system. One of the most central and profoundly hegemonic concepts, commodity fetishism, will be detailed in the following section. Another major critique is that consumerism facilitates the standardization and homogenization of culture and stifles creative quality. Frankfurt School scholars Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) offer widely cited critiques of consumer culture and capitalist media in this light. To them the Culture Industry, a subset of large-scale capitalism influenced by the consumerist culture such capitalism has cultivated, operates in an assembly-line fashion, creating mass-manufactured, formulaic, and, interchangeable products. Horkheimer and Adorno assert the Culture Industry
devalues the artistry and aesthetics of organic creativity, resulting in low quality productions and a narcotized citizenry made up of misguided and/or disenfranchised buyers. Consumer culture is also suggested to facilitate and authenticate a unique type of social division set upon lines of marketability. McAllister (1995) explains these lines of demarcation are not based as much on appealing to the social experiences of such groups, but more so on a list of consumerist categories – emphasizing lifestyle, demographics and psychographics for advertisers to match up to. One of the most popular critical concepts to be extended from consumer culture is that of conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption refers to purchasing things for the purposes of displaying wealth and gaining status. According to Veblen it is when the nouveau riche use commodities as symbols in order to distinguish themselves from other classes, ultimately encouraging class envy and excessive debt (Veblen, 1899, as cited in McAllister, 2008).

Contemporary consumer culture has a unique relationship with minority cultures, because it is a symbolic space in which social inequalities are formed, imposed, experienced and resisted (Chin, 2001). In order to avoid presenting any group or even consumer culture as a whole as one-dimensional, cultures of consumption should be analyzed in their greater historical, economic, political and social contexts by taking into account the implications of historical oppression. This point will be re-addressed later in this chapter.

Commodity Fetishism

Television’s commodification of identity can be contextualized using Marx’s theoretical concept of commodity fetishism, which as mentioned above, is both an implication of consumer culture and a critical concept arising from Marxist scholars. Commodity fetishism serves as a model for understanding “how ideology both emerges out of and conceals the material relations of production” (Torres, 2005, p. 406).
The ideology of capitalism remains most thoroughly deconstructed by the German political economist Karl Marx in his foundational work *Capital* (1976). In this groundbreaking text, Marx scrutinizes the complex system behind value, exchange, labor and class division. At the core of Marx’s theory of capitalist production and all its derivatives are the concepts of use value and exchange value. The former is simply the utility of a thing and is defined by Marx as an expansion on John Locke’s conclusion that one may determine the natural worth of something according to its ability to “supply the necessities or serve the conveniences of human life” (Marx, p. 44). The latter is “the form in which the value of commodities can manifest itself or be expressed” (Marx, p. 46). Exchangeability of commodities is created through contrast and superficial substitution, which is the elementary form of value, in which “the expression of the value of commodity A in terms of any other commodity B, merely distinguishes the value from the use-value of A, and therefore places A merely in a relation of exchange with a single different commodity, B; but it is still far from expressing A’s qualitative equality, and quantitative proportionality, to all commodities” (Marx, p. 67). But in capitalism, exchange value often becomes the “real,” or most important, value of a thing.

And, in the system of advanced capitalism, all things, not just material ones, have exchange values (Jhally, 1990). This can include concepts such as love, lust, sophistication or even consciousness. According to Sut Jhally, this is the result of a move from a market centered on the commodity-form to the market of today, which centers on the sign-form. Consumption in today’s market is primarily concerned with the symbolic and systematic manipulation of signs and codes (Jhally, p. 11). In this process of manipulation, also termed signification (the cornerstone of advanced capitalism), “objects lose any real connection with the basis of their practical utility and instead come to be the material correlate (the signifier) of an increasing
number of constantly changing, abstract qualities” (Jhally, p. 11). Toothpastes that promise whiter teeth equate this with such qualities as social acceptance, romantic desirability, and economic success. Of course, Andersen (1995, p. 89) states the reality behind such abstract associations: “Parent-child relationships will not become more loving when families eat at McDonald’s. And a child will not love his mother more because her laundry detergent makes clothes whiter and brighter”.

It is this elementary form of value that creates superficial contrasts in order to signify its barter quality, but also undermines the ability for consumers to get direct information on that commodity’s performance features/usability, as well as its processes and relations of production – such as how it was made and by whom (Jhally, 1990). Underpinning the capitalist system is an organic unity between commodity production and social relations (Jhally). Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism aims to understand how the commodity exchange process blurs social and production processes (Jhally). Jhally explains that understanding this organic unity is fundamental to Karl Marx’s voyage into deconstructing the capitalist system:

…If one can understand how the commodity [is] produced, distributed, exchanged and consumed, then one can unravel the whole system, because objectified in the commodity are the social relations of its production. They are part of the information the commodity contains within itself. They are part of its communication features. If only we can penetrate down to this information, then we can understand and unravel the whole system of relations of capitalism (Jhally, 1990, p. 26).

As Vincent Mosco (1996, p. 141) explains, “One of the keys to Marxian analysis and a legacy that has influenced all subsequent political economy is to interrogate the commodity to determine what the appearance means, to uncover the social relations congealed in the commodity form.”

Marx (1976, p. 77) was fascinated by the realization that a commodity is ultimately the social essence of human labor that is treated like a visible concrete quality. To humans, in the capitalist system, it appears that the value-relation is inherent in the commodities we exchange
with each other, but it is not. The value-relation is a social creation that has no connection with
the physical or material qualities implied in them (Marx). Thus, the social value placed on
commodities in market capitalism becomes a kind of “fetish.” A fetish can be defined as “an
inanimate object worshipped for its supposed magical powers or because it is considered to be
inhabited by a spirit (Oxford American Dictionary, 2005). The salient concept to grasp here is
that Marx sees a product of human labor as separate from the fetish – or spirit – that attaches to it
and gives it its monetary and social worth. The fetishized commodity carries a double
mystification (Mosco, 1996, p. 143). First, it makes the relationship between capital and labor
appear automatic or natural – despite the fact that it is actually a social construction. The value of
a commodity is the result of the social hierarchy that exists between exchanging parties – which
in modern capitalism involves large corporate conglomerates and individual laborers and
consumers – and so it is therefore not a “natural” process. Secondly, the commodity is reified and
given a new life unattached from any production process where it is also situated in its own
sphere that facilitates the control of social conditions (Mosco, p. 143). The result, Mosco (p. 143)
clarifies, of this double mystification is that these commodities, which are merely the products of
a social process, take on a life and power of their own as well as the power to shape social
relations. Jhally (1990) says commodity fetishism as a concept can be boiled down to a problem
of symbolism – which is at the intersection of the relationship between people and products, and
the relationship between use and exchange value. Commodity fetishism, then, proposes that
capitalism makes it seem like value is within the commodities we exchange with each other, but
actually it is not. That value is actually socially imposed. And one major source of this social and
symbolic imposition is the modern media system.
**Media as a Commodifying System**

There is an inherent and fundamental power in the commodifying process as manifested by large-scale corporate media. Scholars hypothesize the root of such power from various viewpoints. Several top academics such as Herman, Chomsky and many from the Frankfurt School suggest that this power is ideological (Mosco). Companies willingly purchase the means to communicate through mass media because at their roots, mass communications have the great potential to shape consciousness through their use of symbols and images (Mosco, 1996, p. 147). Scholars argue that the mass media help disseminate the ideology of capitalism by “producing messages that reflect the interests of capital, and, through however circuitous, contradictory, and contested a process, advancing support for the interests of capital as a whole and for specific class fractions” (Mosco, p. 147). In this light, the media are often referred to as Consciousness Industry – defined by Jhally (1989, p. 68) as “an industry, which attempts to produce a form of consciousness in the audience that benefits the class that controls the media and industry in general”. Others believe the media’s greatest power may be as an economy force, although ideology is still an important effect. Garnham (as cited in Mosco, p. 147) suggests the mass media are “economic entities with both a direct economic role as creators of surplus value through commodity production and exchange and an indirect role, through advertising, in the creation of surplus value within other sectors of commodity production”.

**The audience commodity.**

One scholar who privileges the economic power of media while also acknowledging its ideological implications is Dallas Smythe (1981). Smythe highlighted the media’s direct role in the capitalist economy by manufacturing the central product of the media – the audience commodity. Smythe (p. 22) believes that people and commodities should not be regarded as disconnected things, but instead as entities joined through relationships in a social process. That
being said, because the audience can be produced, sold and even purchased, it has a use-value; therefore, by definition, an audience is a commodity. As a media economics term, “the audience commodity is a nondurable producer’s good which is bought and used in the marketing of the advertiser’s product” (Smythe, p. 39).

However, the frequently debated question here is, ‘What aspect of the audience do advertisers buy?’ Of course, there are differing views among academics. Smythe (1981) argues that advertisers pay media to provide them audience power. Audience power, he suggests, is a tangible labor in the form of a product – comparable perhaps to hydropower or solar power – “which is used to accomplish the economic and political tasks which are the reason for the existence of the commercial mass media” (Smythe, p. 26). It therefore fuels the economy at large by connecting consumers to markets. However, Sut Jhally (1990, p. 72) disagrees and argues that the real quality of the audience being sold to advertisers is audience-watching time. The central quality of audience watching time is that the viewers harness the ability to watch (so this quite obviously is also the audience’s use-value) and therefore harness the ability to engage in consumption. In addition to this notion of audiences working for advertisers by watching their messages, it is suggested that like any other laborers, viewers earn wages – however, they are paid in the form of entertainment or information media content (Jhally).

Using a different metaphor, Smythe (as cited in Mosco, p. 148) argues that media programming is created for the purpose of attracting audiences to the ads; “It is little more than the ‘free lunch’ that taverns once used to entice customers to drink.” The media content as ‘free lunch’ notion explains the nature of the commercial mass media under monopoly capitalism (Mosco). The unfortunate reality for vendors is the average consumer is unlikely to sit at length and pay attention to a medium that airs commercials only. The medium must offer an incentive, something that will make people want to pay attention to these commercials – such as entertainment or information in various forms. According to Smythe, this is why advertisers pay
media companies to develop content that will attract people – potential consumers – to the television where their ads run. ‘Buy a beer, get a free lunch’ is therefore parallel to, ‘Watch these advertisements, get a TV show’.

**Advertising.**

Advanced capitalism is reliant on the marketing and advertising industries’ hegemonic abilities to disseminate and naturalize the ideology of capitalism by mass-producing messages of consumption. Advertisements are perhaps the purest form of consumption-based messages. According to Rumbo (2002, pp. 134-135), advertisements have such a lasting impact on the collective consciousness because “the hegemonic cultural logic of consumerism systematically permeates public, discursive, and psychic spaces, dictating that our lived experiences are increasingly shaped and monitored by marketers”. With television, we typically receive at least 15 minutes of commercials and promotions for every hour of airtime. The dominance and structure of our commercial media systems maintains our exposure to and acceptance of consumerism by feeding us with incessant portrayals of the benefits of this system— commercials, thus underscoring an ideological function of commercial media.

While cable remains young in comparison to broadcast television, it quickly took advantage of the trials and errors of the networks that had experimented with earlier advertising systems, ultimately adopting the same commercial system. Today, cable television is governed by this system whose commercial logic incorporates numerous buyers in the spot advertising system. Spot advertising is the “‘magazine-style’ system in which many advertisers buy commercial time during a single program, rather than just one exclusive” sponsorship (McAllister, 2005, p. 218). Media firms find this approach most desirable because it reduces the high costs for a single sponsor producing a full show, increases revenue potential for networks and increases networks’ controls over programming and scheduling (McAllister). The cable industry’s decision to use spot
advertising meant that like network programming, the content and form of cable shows would be influenced by advertisers and their ads.

While one general purpose behind commercials may be to inform audiences of products from which they may benefit, these ads also influence basic perceptions of life by symbolically linking social, personal and cultural qualities to desirable images and emotions in order to elevate these products beyond the tangible good at hand (Andersen, 1995). Many media and communication scholars writing about marketing and the linkage of social qualities to material products cite Raymond Williams’ challenge to the common assumption that hypercommercialism is the result of an overly materialistic society (McAllister, 2005; Andersen; Jhally, 1990). Williams (1980, p. 185) explains, “It is often said that our society is too materialist, and that advertising reflects this…but it seems to me that in this respect our society is quite evidently not materialist enough.” Otherwise we would not need to be persuaded by what he calls *magical* inducements. We would simply see the product itself as valuable and no associative links would be necessary (Williams). This is why a central characteristic of the TV commercial as a text is the fetishization of commodities and the act of purchasing commodities.

However, what could be found behind the screen of the glamorized product is another reality, i.e. exploitative production practices, social realities, the failure of delivering the magical qualities advertised, etc. (Andersen, 1995). Advertising in late capitalism creates a dynamic disconnect. People reach into the consumption sphere seeking social status, respect, health, wealth, power, and control because these things are limited in society’s political and economic spheres (Andersen). The promise of advertising is problem resolution in addition to regenerated happiness in the realm of consumption, which really just distracts our attentions from understanding these problems in their holistic contexts (Andersen). It provides us with superficial relief while facilitating complacency.
Consumer culture and advertising also fetishize the concept of democracy (Andersen, 1995). The market, like democracy, is centered on the idea of choice, purposing that one may attain whatever quality of life they idealize; advertising, we are told, presents us with these choices (despite the realities of monopolization, barriers to entry and undifferentiated products). This commonality is why consumer culture has historically been linked with the concept of democracy (Ewan, as cited in Andersen). However, framing choice as buying one product instead of another minimizes the potential of more fundamental social agency. According to Andersen (p. 66):

The most pernicious effect of advertising is to keep us striving for the good life within the realm of consumption when...the only way that prosperity for the majority can be accomplished is through changes in the economic and political practices that determine the allocation of wealth and power.

In this sense, then, advertising – by celebrating products that cannot deliver what is promised – encourages a larger social exhaustion, overspending, and frustration.

**Television Programming**

While commercials are clearly the direct manifestations of advertising and consumption on television, the economic logic of the commodified audience and the subsequent fetishism also crosses over into the programming, given that programming is designed to create a favorable symbolic cocoon for advertising. One way we may see this is as plugola. Plugola is “the insertion of ideas that favor specific advertisers” into non-advertising content (McAllister, 2005, p. 225). It takes the form of commodity-based feature stories in the news, product placements – which are quite common in reality shows -- or even sponsorships such as the FedEx Orange Bowl. Although audiences may not mind or even notice instances of plugola, the reality of its existence suggests
that program creators may not be able to break free from the consumption model since advertising and production are so closely involved (McAllister).

Another example of consumer logic crossing over into non-advertising programming is with the programmatic celebration of conspicuous consumption, even if specific products are not featured. In regard to television, certain shows or even whole networks (as mentioned below) work to keep viewers in the consumption mindset by indirectly incorporating consumer values into the content. Conspicuous consumption in non-advertising content may promote and trivialize “overspending and indebtedness among” viewers (McAllister, 2005, p. 228). Further, exposure to such programming heightens viewers’ associations of material possessions with an idealized wealth, but it is important to note this relationship is mitigated by individual social factors, i.e. income, education, etc. (McAllister, p. 228).

As we move further into late capitalism, more TV content, regardless of genre or form, perpetuates consumerism and materialism by blatantly and subtly glorifying lifestyle, fame and class, while simultaneously capitalizing on audiences’ desires for said qualities (Andersen, 1995; McAllister, 2005). Cable networks often are vehicles for delivering specific audiences to advertisers by offering desirable, consumption-based lifestyles, and therefore the programming on these networks flow with the commercials. Spending on homes (The Home and Garden Network), on food (The Food Network), and on kids brands (Nickelodeon, The Cartoon Network) are obvious examples.

The Black television audience has become a treasure to the cable industry, but at the same time has been disadvantaged by the measuring techniques of the broadcast television audience ratings system and the mass audiences needed by the broadcast networks. Fuller (2007) explains in broadcast TV Black shows can be very popular within Black households, but without crossover appeal to White viewers those audiences remain small and earn low Nielsen ratings ultimately resulting in cancellations. However, cable’s advertising and subscription based funding
allows for greater flexibility in accommodating this audience segment (Fuller). Since the beginning of the 21st century, Blacks have maintained higher cable viewership and subscription rates than the majority (Fuller). This particular segment costs advertisers less money, because according to Fuller (p. 6), the easier a group is to reach – commonly Blacks, women and elderly of all races – the cheaper they cost. Opposite of the aforementioned groups are White men, usually in the middle class or higher, that advertisers find most desirable and therefore more “valuable”, an incentive that carries ideological implications (Fuller).

Overall, this conceptualization of the economic arrangement of commodified communication exists because of the fundamental and holistic interrelations between the mass media, advertisers and the audience (Smythe, 1981). Due to these relationships, the commercial mass media is essential to the homeostasis of the late capitalist economy – especially by helping to set the agenda in the individual and national consciousness by facilitating the mass marketing of industrially produced commodities and services created in the capitalist system and delivering it to audiences that have the power to complete the business objective (Smythe). But a consequence is the expansion of symbolic power of commodities into the realm of the social, including social relations and social identity. But not all social groups are equal in their place in society or their cultural identity. How, then, might commodity-based identities be influenced by one group which is also influenced by another power social marker, that of race?

Black Identity

The second component in the theoretical framework is Black identity, which will be analyzed in order to establish the salient factors that influence African American consumption today. Overall, this section aims to deconstruct some complexities of Black consumer culture by placing it into its cultural, historical and political contexts in order to understand the currency of
the constructed representations of Blackness most commonly disseminated. The first section applies the work of W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) to review important colonial and post-colonial elements in Black history that foreground the class and economic inequalities and relations that manifest today. Section two looks at popular culture as a space in which images of Black identity and consumerism are created and packaged for receivers (Chin, 2001). The two areas of analysis combined provide a foundation for determining how the ideology of consumption is being sold to poor and working class African Americans by demonstrating that consumer culture is “embedded in (the) everyday politics” of identity (Chin, p. 11). Ultimately, social inequality and difference are foundational elements upon which fetishized representations are based.

**The Legacy of Colonialism**

According to Wellesley College professor Marcellus Andrews (1999) the current economic circumstances of Black America stem from the legacies of the oppressive duo of capitalism and racism. In other words, today’s racial poverty differential does not exist in a vacuum; it is the current manifestation of a relatively short historical timeline. What we are currently witnessing are the continued legacies of slavery, post-emancipation and civil-rights backlash (Andrews). Elizabeth Chin (2001, p.3) supports Andrews’ suggestion that African Americans of today are not divorced from their circumstances of the recent past and ultimately it is these factors that molded current relations with consumption. As originally a consumed product themselves (slaves were bought and sold, after all), a group that subsequently experienced extreme labor exploitation and economic poverty, but experiencing all of this in the “land of plenty,” African Americans have a unique and anguished historical relationship to consumption.

According to W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), much of the race’s troubles were exacerbated by emancipation and not merely slavery. To slaves, slavery was the root of social injustice and
emancipation was their key to equality, but the ensuing decades of post-emancipatory hatred and abuse by society and its government proved otherwise (Du Bois). Emancipation left hoards of newly freed men unemployed and uneducated about pay wages and economic systematics (Du Bois). This impacted not just former slaves, but people of every makeup. White and Black citizens and politicians wrote to President Lincoln requesting the establishment of a bureau that would humanely facilitate freedmen’s transitions “from the old condition of forced labor to their new state of voluntary industry” (Du Bois, p. 20). Several government and grassroots social projects were established to help, but most were quickly shutdown. Just one example was Field-order Number Fifteen, an 1865 edict by Union General Sherman that allowed Blacks to farm the land between Charleston, South Carolina and Jacksonville, Florida. However, within months President Andrew Johnson reversed the order giving it back to White landowners (Du Bois, pp. 20, 198). Du Bois describes the anguish of the post-emancipation Black man who grew increasingly conscious of the burdens connected with being nothing more than a former commodity:

For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back, that dead weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem. He felt his poverty; without a cent, without a home, without land, tools, or savings, he had entered into competition with rich, landed, skilled neighbors. To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships. He felt the weight of his ignorance, -- not simply of letters, but of life, of business, of the humanities; the accumulated sloth and shirking and awkwardness of decades and centuries shackled his hands and feet (Du Bois, pp. 12-13).

By the turn of the twentieth century over 88 percent of Black men, women and children maintained work as sharecroppers in what came to be known as the Cotton Kingdom (Du Bois, 1903, p. 99). Even though slavery had long ended, the cotton crop industry more than doubled in value since the Civil War era, making it one of the chief global industries of the time (Du Bois). However, despite their undeniable role in enriching the south, Black people remained poor - they were unable to avoid the inevitable debt that would define them. This debt, Du Bois (p.100) says,
manifested as their “continued inability…to make income cover expense. This is the direct heritage of the South from the wasteful economies of the slave regime”, a post-war financial crash and economic chaos that ensued following Emancipation.

The Black sharecropper started out in debt - the system made sure of this. The currency in the Cotton Kingdom was cotton itself (Du Bois, 1903, p. 107). Cotton was paid for rent and food and clothing were fronted to them by merchant employers for a debt. Earning little or even zero capital in a system of capitalism, families were bound to bankruptcy. The majority of sharecropping families ended each year in great debt to their merchant employers (Du Bois, p. 108). It was an exploitative economic system which Du Bois (p. 108) called “radically wrong”, for it was the “slavery of debt” that kept the Negro at work and in poverty. In the early 1900s it was common for eight to ten southern sharecroppers to live in a one or two room cabin with just a single door and a square shaped cut out for a window. Their living quarters, he says, were “dirty and dilapidated, smelling of eating and sleeping, poorly ventilated, and anything but homes” (Du Bois, p. 101). Such extreme economic stress also changed the dynamics of the Black family. For instance the average size of the post-emancipation Black family actually declined, and young people married at later ages as a result of the lack of sufficient income and financial stability for sustaining a family (Du Bois).

Du Bois (1903, p. 102) says these social ills were enhanced because most Black farmers were restricted to little, if any education. His research revealed illiteracies to be vast and fundamental. According to his study of Dougherty County, Georgia almost two-thirds of them could not read or write (Du Bois, p. 102). “They are ignorant of the world about them, of modern economic organization, of the function of government, of the individual worth and possibilities, -- of nearly all those things which slavery in self-defense had to keep them from learning” (Du Bois, pp. 103-104). For comparison’s sake, Mr. Du Bois (p. 104) explains, “Much that the White boy
imbibes from his earliest social atmosphere forms the puzzling problems of the Black boy’s mature years.”

This is not to say that all Blacks were damned. It was unfortunately just a bulk of the population who had known no trade but servitude and field labor as a product of slavery. In the early 1900s Du Bois summarized the tragedy he witnessed:

...For a few thousand poor ignorant field hands, in the face of poverty, a falling market, and social stress, to save and capitalize...in a generation has meant a tremendous effort. The rise of a nation, the pressing forward of a social class, means a bitter struggle, a hard and soul-sickening battle with the world such as few of the more favored classes know or appreciate (p. 116).

Although their liberation was still relatively new, some freed Blacks were naturally tempted by the wealthy lifestyles being displayed by their higher-class counterparts (Du Bois, 1903). According to Du Bois (p. 60), many lost sight of the necessity of establishing economic foundations, and were instead tempted into seeing gold as “the goal of racing” and not merely prizes along the way. “For every social ill the panacea of Wealth has been urged, -- wealth to overthrow the remains of the slave feudalism”, to employ Black serfs and as a prospect to “keep them working”, and as the end goal of politics, law and even public education (Du Bois, p. 61). The overall point being argued here is that “the material and symbolic constraints on the consumption of African Americans so evident under slavery have not disappeared in the present day - they have only transformed (in some cases barely) and transmogrified, like the process of consumption itself” (Chin, 2001, p. 43).

Chin argues that today these constraints still manifest to a significant degree in the consumer sphere. It is essential to look closely at mediated representations of Blackness and analyze how they produce and package images of an African American consumer identity (Chin). One way images of African American consumerism are packaged to this demographic is through Black popular culture. The sphere of Black popular culture is a powerful symbolic channel
through which the ideology of consumption is transmitted (Chin). The next section deconstructs the space of (Black) popular culture (Hall, 1993).

(Black) Popular Culture

The politics of representation.

While the legacies of colonialism and imperialism are tragic and discriminatory, African Americans are not doomed by their history. In contemporary America, the realm of popular culture offers this group a place to resist, or at least contest, this fate by broadening the scope of Black presence and turning it into power. According to Stuart Hall (1993, p. 113), popular culture is a commodified and powerfully mythic arena or theater in which cultural identities may be imagined, prepared and (re)presented. However, to enter into the American realm of popular culture Blackness has always faced the colossal task of challenging the reigning system of Westernized polarization that has fixed “Whiteness” at the top and “Otherness” at the bottom of the social and cultural hierarchical value system. That is why the mere fact that an entire television network that spotlights (the Black) race can even exist as a medium within such a powerful arena is evidence of progress and an interesting new politics of difference than that of W.E.B. DuBois’ time.

Scholars like Cornel West (1993) suggest such a monumental shift is partially rooted in particular historic moments of social movement, like the counter-cultural movements in the United States during the 1960s and 70s. Stuart Hall (p. 105) considers these acts of resistance as so essential to the access of Black representation into cultural politics because “decentering or displacement opens up new spaces of contestation and affects a momentous shift in the high culture of popular culture relations, thus presenting us with a strategic and important opportunity
for intervention in the popular cultural field.” The result is a popular culture that has more room for contextualization and pluralism than ever before (West).

Of course, while the advancements in cultural politics that influence popular culture are historic they are still far from infiltrating the hegemony and have even left many scholars questioning just how emancipatory they really were (Kitwana, 2002; Chin, 2001). In fact, some cultural theorists argue that since this break into the mainstream, some aspects of Black culture have grown increasingly disenfranchised thanks to commercialization. While popular culture is thought by many to be a space of liberation, it is equally attractive to those with capitalistic interests. In regard to popular culture as a globalizing medium where Black identity is showcased and experienced, Kitwana (2002) adds that it is simultaneously exploited. “The irony in all this”, he says, “is that the global corporate structure that gave young Blacks a platform was the driving force behind our plight” (Kitwana, p. 11).

**Film & television.**

Black representation in American entertainment has primarily been at the hands of White creators (Gray, 2005). As a result, the first fifty years of motion pictures were extremely racist depicting African Americans through derogatory characterizations or by simply excluding them altogether (Bogle, 2001; Gray). In fact, one of the first feature length narratives in history, *The Birth of a Nation*, was so overtly racist that even today the Ku Klux Klan uses it as recruiting propaganda. According to film scholar John Belton (2005, p. 16), “If *The Birth of a Nation* marked the birth of classical Hollywood cinema, then that birth was grounded in White racism.”

Throughout the history of television and cinema racial preference and Whiteness have been most apparent through the exclusion of minority subjects. By only showing minority characters in rare and special circumstances that served a deliberate purpose in the narrative, TV shows and movies created a world of Whiteness, which assumed and positioned the viewer as being Caucasian (Gray, 2005). This had a hegemonic effect, by normalizing the White standpoint
as the default position. As a result, race in television and movies became invisible. Indeed, the White, heteronormative, patriarchal standpoint was systemic in mass media altogether, and it took conscious transgressions of race, sexuality, class inequality, etc. to render them visible (Gray). For instance, up until the 1940s and 50s Black performers were marginalized to stereotypical roles; because they were not regular fixtures in television or film story lines these actors and actresses, with some exceptions, had few opportunities and therefore constantly struggled to find employment (Bogle, 2001).

When African Americans did actually receive roles, they were almost always exaggeratedly inferior caricatures of Blackness. These characters appeared as one of five stereotypic typologies created to entertain White audiences by demeaning the Black. The uncle tom was what Donald Bogle (2001, p. 4) says was the first of the “socially acceptable Good Negro” character types known for being kind, religious and faithfully loyal to his “White massa”. Common depictions of the tom are seen in films like For Massa’s Sake (1911) and, of course, the many renditions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1903, 1909, 1913, 1914, 1927, as cited in Bogle). The tragic mulatto stereotype - seen in the movie Imitation of Life - is a light-skinned biracial woman who suffers emotional hardship and tragedy at the hands of a racially divided society (Bogle; Belton, 2005). Films used the mulatto’s European features of long hair and fair skin tone to distinguish her as a beauty amongst other Black women. Another exaggerated caricature, the coon, is described by Bogle (p. 8) as “those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language.” This stereotype is often considered the most offensive because these Blacks were depicted with extreme unintelligence for the purposes of comic relief. Mammy, the female counterpart to the coon, is loud, bossy and overweight (Bogle). The aunt jemima is considered a cousin to mammy and somewhat overlaps with tom - a woman of God who gladly submits to
White oppression (Bogle). The fifth typology is the buck, a violently hyper-sexual Black male who threatened the purity and safety of White women and society in general (Bogle; Belton).

Although Black visibility and representation have made significant progress, systemic racism has never entirely disappeared. In the early decades of television most representations linked raced bodies and communities, usually African American, to particular social conditions that were considered to be undesirable (Torres, 2005). This tactical presentation of “race-as-problem” worked to create a boundary against the racialized ‘other’ “for the amusement or education of the majority White viewer” (Torres, p. 398-399). Some of the “problematic” conditions that were commonly constructed were “ghetto” life and racist oppression, often signified with poverty, absent fathers, unemployment, substandard housing, drugs and violence (Torres, p. 396). Interestingly, Torres (p. 396) notes that even though these depictions gelled the linkage of race with the social problem they were not always negative and sometimes even portrayed Blacks as “falling victim to” or rising above the circumstances. This is exemplified with the chain of hit series produced by Norman Lear in the 1970s. On Good Times (CBS, 1974-79) and Sanford and Son (NBC, 1972-77) we see race linked to poverty (Torres). In The Jeffersons (CBS, 1975-85) their Blackness is linked with “racial striving, deracination and assimilation” (Torres, p. 397).

However, television in the 1980s had a profoundly different approach to racial representation as it moved away from the 1970’s liberally sympathetic representations toward a more conservative agenda (Torres, 2005). On one end of the spectrum were fictional depictions of Black affluence that exaggerated the state of racial equality, most notably – The Cosby Show (NBC, 1984-1992). On the other end was the evening news, which increasingly covered race and Blackness through frames of controversy, like affirmative action, welfare abuse, violent crime, drugs, poverty and declining moral and family values (Torres).
These starkly different “pictures of race in America” paralleled each other throughout the 1980s (Torres, 2005, p. 398). According to Herman Gray (as cited in Torres, p. 398), the culturally discriminate newscasts and *The Cosby Show* were “dialectical opposites” that when put together produced one salient implication - “that, whether because Blacks have ‘made it’ or because (they) are hopelessly corrupt culturally or morally, aggressive civil rights measures were no longer necessary or appropriate”. Hence, throughout most of the 1980s television maintained the theme of “race-as-problem” (Torres).

Some scholars argue the *The Cosby Show’s* exhibiting such a dramatic contrast to the delinquencies seen on the news was politically charged (Sefton-Green, 1990). In fact, Bill Cosby sought to change the misconceptions of the African American population by redefining Blackness as a multifaceted concept. The result was the Huxtables, a Black family living a lifestyle with which many middle-class White Americans identified, or even strived for themselves (Sefton-Green; Torres).

One hypothesis for the unprecedented success of *The Cosby Show* is that it was complaisantly resistant, in that it depicted African Americans as passive and culturally assimilated into White America (West, 1993; Sefton-Green, 1990). Cornel West (p. 28) says such attempts to reclaim Black identity were built “on the ideological, social, and cultural terrains of other, non-Black peoples”. In other words, Whiteness was simply reenacted by African American performers accompanied by signifiers of Blackness, the most obvious being their raced bodies (West). Cornel West (1993) argues that African American-led ventures into representation that used passive routes, such as *The Cosby Show*, merely played into the existing binary system of good/bad and positive/negative images. Further, West says such representations of “opposition” were oftentimes created by “anxiety-ridden, middle-class Black intellectuals (predominantly male and heterosexual) grappling with their sense of double consciousness…caught between a quest for White approval and acceptance and an attempt to overcome the internalized association of
Blackness with inferiority” (West, p. 29). Double-consciousness is an idea originating from W.E.B Du Bois, which he explains as:

...This sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body…(Du Bois, 1903, p. 9).

In Jhally and Lewis' (1992) study on TV character class and race distributions during the 70s and 80s, it appeared that Black characters had achieved profound social mobility almost overnight. In the period labeled the ‘pre-Cosby era’ (1971 to 1976) African Americans made up 30 percent of television’s working class (Jhally & Lewis, p. 58-61). Yet, during the sample’s period referred to as the ‘Cosby era’ (1984 to 1989) this number dropped to zero percent; according to these results, the African American blue-collar work force had disappeared from television completely (Jhally & Lewis, p. 58-61). This depiction of Black social mobility contradicted the socio-economic reality. In fact, during Ronald Reagan’s eight years as president Black America had fallen into economic recession: the number of Black home owners dropped more than six percent, while Black renters increased by just over six percent totaling 56 percent of the race’s population (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1990, as cited in Jhally & Lewis). Worst of all, by 1988 more than 33 percent of African Americans were living below the poverty level. It can be said then that the fictional Huxtables did not represent your average Black family of the 80s.

The Huxtables were unique because their upper middle class lifestyles detached them from their race and from the social and economic crises attached to it (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). In fact, Crispin Miller sees this contrast as so great (as cited in Jhally & Lewis, p. 8) he even calls The Cosby Show a virtual advertisement for the “fairness” of the American capitalist system. The ‘anyone can make it’ mantra of the American Dream “is a myth that sustains a conservative political ideology blind to the inequalities hindering” so many people born on the lower and
heavier end of the socioeconomic spectrum and “privileging persons born on easy street” (Jhally & Lewis, p. 8). The Huxtables as the ideal assimilators – at a time when most other mediated images of African Americans prompted fear and confusion in many White viewers – may have suggested to the majority that racial tolerance and even equality had been reached, releasing them from the unspoken guilt for any perceived responsibility and fears they held over Black conditions of the time (Jhally & Lewis). Class, unlike race, established a dynamic that gave majority viewers psychological reassurance that many of them sought regarding race relations (Jhally & Lewis).

In 1992, the television industry’s ways of covering African Americans were shaken up as a result of the Rodney King video and the ensuing L.A. Riots – the broadcasts of which projected the by-products of more than a decade of the Reagan-Bush governance (Torres, 2005). Race then became defined to audiences as either hopeless urban poverty or unacceptable urban menace (Torres, p. 398). Sasha Torres (p. 398) suggests that, “In many ways…the obsessive coverage of the looting during the riots situated the residents of South Central Los Angeles in opposition to the commodity form, which, viewers were to understand, they could not obtain through legal means”.

The definitive move away from the “race-as-problem” trend came with cable’s rise in popularity and its unique ability to reach specific audiences by narrowcasting to niche demographics (Torres, 2005). Today, TV programs on both broadcast and cable now look to attract the variety of niche or “minoritarian audiences” (Torres). In fact Torres (2005) also connects this to the explosion of “gay-themed programming (from Ellen and Will and Grace to Queer Eye for the Straight Guy…”). Program creators, she explains (p. 399), have finally come to “understand that minoritarian audiences, identities, and subjectivities have now become commodities to be traded among programmers”, marketers and advertisers.

*Hip hop culture.*
While television and film have made significant contributions to contemporary African American culture and identity, rap music, which was started by urban youth in the post-civil rights era, gave rise to hip hop culture - and is considered by many to be one of the defining components of Black identity today (Kitwana, 2002). In the 2002 book, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*, Bakari Kitwana deconstructs the spectrum of problems that manifest within the Black post-civil rights generations. Kitwana specifically recognizes the social ills of the hip hop generation - which he recognizes as Black Americans born between 1965 and 1984 - as attestations to cultural phenomena spanning several decades. It is important to understand that hip hop has grown into a culture in its own right; no longer does it merely represent a genre of music. Of course, hip hop has its own musical style, but it also has its own fashion codes and trends, gender roles, mannerisms, value systems, etc. What is perhaps most interesting about hip hop culture is its paradoxical powers to simultaneously undermine and empower Black culture (Kitwana).

Since its inception in the 1970s rap music has served as a form of protest against social neglect and injustice that Black people experienced on a daily basis (Trapp, 2005). The escalating social tensions and the "blame the victim" racial politics of Reagan-esque neo-liberal ideology "led Black artists to start a social movement through music" (Watkins, as cited in Trapp, p. 1483). Rap, then, has served as a democratic, emancipatory medium through which these frustrations could be voiced.

However, the empowering aspects of rap and hip hop have been greatly overshadowed by what are considered socially undesirable qualities and stereotypes. According to some scholars hip hop has enhanced society’s associations between Blackness and poverty, ignorance, anti-education, anti-family values and criminal behavior (Kitwana, 2002, p. xxi). It has also generated a long list of racial stereotypes. Black men are violent, gun toting, drug-dealing thugs or “gangstas” who indiscriminately rape and kill; Black women are stereotypically gold digging,
promiscuous, “baby-mommamas” who have lots of kids from different fathers, and are also “welfare queens,” who choose to live off of taxpayer money rather than stopping having children or getting a decent job (Mahiri & Conner, 2003; Kitwana).

Since hip hop is now commercially exhibited on a massive scale, these social constructions of Blackness (and contrarily non-Blackness) are presented to people of all races and ethnicities. Indeed, in its earliest years it may have been created for Black audiences, however today these images are not kept in a racially-restrictive vacuum: they influence non-Blacks, too. There are many similar criticisms of the genre going commercial; one in particular suggests that when hip hop was commercialized, African American identity and the race at large were decontextualized and pitched back to society as an all-encompassing representation of “Blackness”.

A growing number of academics believe these mass mediated misconceptions are what undermine the progress of the entire Black race. Applying Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction, in many ways hip hop culture appears to play a significant role in the maintenance of the social status quo in spite of the many advancements African Americans have made (as cited in MacLeod, 2004; Bourdieu, 1993). First, the cultural capital obtained via hip hop culture has a very low exchange rate in mainstream America (MacLeod). Some of the behaviors exhibited as components of Blackness are classified by the dominant system as unacceptable and punishable. This puts the subscribers to the lifestyle at a significant disadvantage. The clothes and accessories that connote hip hop are often deemed by the majority culture as delinquent, therefore justifying such persons being rejected from potential jobs, interpersonal relationships, purchases, and an endless list of other social resources. (Chin, 2001). This lack of valuable cultural capital also extends to linguistics, which has a distinct value for street credibility – hence, grammar by the book is considered “talking White” (MacLeod). In dominant culture, though, the lack of what is regarded as “proper” English symbolizes a lack of intelligence. In the end, cultural capital sold
by hip hop culture is only recognized as valid within a very limited group in society and is judged (most often negatively) by many others (MacLeod). This viewpoint contends that by African Americans buying into and condoning these representations, they are ultimately consenting to their own subjugation and the indirect reproduction of the dominant order.

How, then, might specific images of the Black consumer found in program and commercial images on BET factor into issues of commodity fetishism and Black representation? Before addressing this question specifically, the next chapter provides detailed descriptions of the research method, sample and research questions used in this study.
This study uses a qualitative methodology and critical textual analysis as its method. As will be discussed later in the chapter, the textual analysis was guided by the works of many scholars, including Alan McKee (2003), Budd, Craig & Steinman (1999) and Lindlof and Taylor (2002); insights from feminist methodology reminded of the importance of self-reflexivity, as noted by Ramazanoglu & Holland (2002/2005). The research in this thesis falls under the paradigm of critical-cultural theory, which is described by Lindlof and Taylor (p. 47) as the “body of work” that “involves an ethically heightened and politically reflective study of the relationships between power, knowledge, and discourse that are produced in contexts of historical and cultural struggle”.

For the research sample, I gathered prime-time programming and commercial texts on Black Entertainment Television (BET). One of my greatest inspirations to write on this topic came from reading Elizabeth Chin’s *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture* (2001), a book written as “An exposé of the realities facing poor Black children in our consumer society”. I embarked on this study to better understand how relationships between hegemonic capitalism and African American identity are mediated in popular culture. More specifically, my objective was to deconstruct discourses of Black consumer culture found in the texts through a dual lens of work on Black identity and the critical concept of commodity fetishism.

My approach to the interpretation of discourses was influenced by the works of many different theorists within the realms of cultural studies. This includes Jhally and Lewis (1992),
Torres (2005), McAllister (1996, 2005), DeRose, Fürsich and Haskins (2003) and Christians & Carey (1989). One element of the analysis was to research political economic information about BET and each of the three programs. Such information came from popular sources, trade industry sources, and the BET website.

The textual data sample was seven hours total from three 30-minute original BET programs, *The Black Carpet*, *The Boot* and *Baldwin Hills: Season Two*. Altogether the sample consisted of two episodes/one hour of *The Boot*, four episodes/two hours of *The Black Carpet*, and eight episodes/four hours of *Baldwin Hills*. Each 30-minute unit, consisting of the original program, commercials and promotions, was recorded during its first-run, prime-time, timeslot for one month (July 13, 2008 to August 14, 2008). Two *Baldwin Hills* episodes were recorded as reruns and were not in their first-run slots. These two episodes were included for analysis of the programming content, but were omitted from analysis for their commercial material. Two different recordings were made of each program, from two different digital video recording (DVR) machines, to assure an accurate recording of the texts. The recordings from one DVR were burned onto DVDs. Given the emphasis on commodity discourse in this project, it was important not to rely on commercial DVDs or webcasts of the programs, but rather to capture their embeddedness in the commercial context of broadcasting on cable television.

One challenge I faced in recording the data was with the scheduling. As with many cable networks, BET does not follow the traditional fall season broadcast network schedule. BET’s weekly programming schedules were released only one week in advance, and the season ending dates for the shows were not always apparent. This unpredictability did impact the sample. *The Boot* aired during the first two weeks of recording, but was moved – without explanation (on TV or the website) – to afternoon syndication at the start of August. This was unexpected.

First-run broadcasts were selected in order to observe the possibility of “commodity flow” that may occur between as well as within the different textual categories, including
programs, commercials and promotions (Budd, Craig & Steinman, 1999). Using first-runs also preserved the contextual significance of the advertising content and the intended audience. Since "tie-in" campaigns that connect an advertisement with a program may only be aired during the first-run of a program (and not in subsequent repeat airings of an episode), it was clear that emphasizing the first airing of episodes would be especially important for Chapter Five, which emphasizes the connection between programs, promotions and commercials.

These three shows, *The Black Carpet*, *The Boot* and *Baldwin Hills*, were selected for several reasons. First, they were all being heavily promoted on BET’s television channel and website as some of their top summer shows. They were also all in new seasons and therefore airing brand new episodes. Plus, they were similar in that each was some form of reality TV programming, which is a genre becoming increasingly dominant on cable television, and defined for its conflation of entertainment and advertising (Deery, 2004). According to Deery (p. 2), “Reality TV represents, among other things, the triumph of the market (and) the notion that everyone as well as everything has its price…” Reality television also commodifies lived experience. Deery (p. 13) explains, “In the worlds of advertising and Reality TV there is a focus on...the creation of the self, particularly among young participants who feel their identities are still fluid. This has both commercial and political force”. These arguments position reality TV as a justifiable genre for use in this analysis regarding the intersection of consumer culture and identity.

The three shows in the sample are produced by small, independent studios and BET Networks, which as previously discussed is owned by Viacom. *The Boot* is produced by Renegade 83 Productions. Renegade considers itself the leader in television's "unscripted relationship genre" having created shows like *The 5th Wheel*, *The Surreal Life* and its flagship program *Blind Date* (Renegade 83, 2006). As a result of this specialty it was chosen to assist The WB network's transition into a comedic brand (Renegade 83). In 2007, Renegade's development
executive, Maira Suro was hired as MTV’s senior vice president of series development - West Coast after having previously worked as an executive at UPN and Spelling Entertainment (Zeitchik, 2007). While it is independently owned, Renegade has partnered with several large studios, including 20th Century Fox Television, Dreamworks SKG and with Viacom on the USA Network series The 4400 (Renegade 83).

Baldwin Hills’ second season is produced by Michael McNamara, Sheri Maroufkhani and Bill Rademaekers from McCommera Filmworks, Inc. (also referred to as McFilmworks) in partnership with BET Networks (“BET’s Baldwin Hills Returns”, 2008). McFilmworks is a self-proclaimed "leader in the world of cost-effective, high-quality digital television productions" having developed within the reality, music entertainment and documentary genres (McFilmworks). Due to its interest in music programs the studio has worked extensively with Viacom subsidiaries: VH1, BET, CMT, MTV and LOGO. After its success with Baldwin Hills BET and McFilmworks worked together to create a companion show - Harlem Heights, a "docu-soap" set in New York City (McFilmworks). It is independently owned. The Black Carpet is produced exclusively by BET Networks (BET News Release).

Through each stage of the analysis process I maintained a research diary. While watching each episode in the sample I documented the times for reference points in the programs and commercials and also made a list of every promotion. Altogether, the diary and my notes used in this project exceeded 80 pages.

Each recorded unit was analyzed in a multi-step process. The first step was a general preliminary observation using commodification and Black identity as "sensitized concepts" (Christians & Carey, 1989), a suggested technique for focusing qualitative analysis. At this early stage, such large textual themes, such as the premise of the programs – and the implications of this premise as a statement on commodity and identification – were deconstructed. Next, was a repeat-viewing process involving note-taking and transcribing thematically relevant scenes and
segments of the text-based commodity discourses as related to Black identity discourses. These themes were developed from previous literature or were found recurring throughout the texts. Interpretative flexibility was also a goal in noting resistant, or counter-hegemonic, meanings in the texts. In this step, descriptions of character appearance, narrative development, settings, and dialogue were constructed, again especially as related to the twin concepts of commodity fetishism and Black identity, a combination that was noted in all 14 episodes. At this stage, issues of symbolic construction in language, sounds, images, and filmic techniques such as editing were noted when relevant to the study's main concepts, as suggested by critical film and television methodologists McKee (2003) and Budd, Craig, and Steinman (1999). Work such as DeRose, Fürsich and Haskins (2003) remind scholars that television also has unique communicative properties – what they call the supertext – graphics, animation, integrated camera styles, etc. -- that also must be attended for particular programs. Segments were viewed multiple times as analytical connections were made and to double-check note-taking accuracy and conceptual interpretations. A similar process was developed for commercials and promotions for some of the programs in the sample, especially during The Black Carpet, as will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Each of the two analysis chapters required additional textual methods. Chapter Four required reflection on the main messages about commodity fetishism and Black identity within the programs-as-texts. This included themes that cut across all programs, as well as unique manifestations within the commodity meanings of a program. Chapter Five required also an analysis of similar themes across different textual types as they appeared within one program’s episode, especially focusing on the hyper-commodity oriented program Black Carpet. One way this was done was simply to list all of the explicit commodities, in order, within a program, and the textual categories (program, commercial, promotion) in which they appeared (see Table 5-1 in Chapter Five). Other textual factors, such as backgrounds and digital effects, were especially relevant for this chapter’s analysis.
As the researcher, I used a reflexive approach in conducting each phase of this study, and sought to be conscious of and transparent in the inevitable relationships between the research and myself, such as personal agendas and how I am socially situated within the context of the issues at hand (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2005). I held myself accountable to the reality that my critical capacities and schemas are curbed by my knowledge, lived experiences, inexperience, cultures, sensitivities and “political openness to silences and exclusions” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, p. 119). The general purpose for such an approach is to assure an ethical practice of social science research by first acknowledging the schematizing power of the individual consciousness and the possibility of it influencing the analysis.

This thesis is not easily ontologically or epistemologically categorized. It does however try to force us to see (some) ways power is situated and to do so it privileges a post-colonial ontology. My interpretations are based on the understanding that while White patriarchal capitalism no longer exists as explicitly as it once did through legal systems of racial, gender and class oppression it is, logically, still entrenched in all aspects of American life. I explore the ideological component of culture through the concept of hegemony. Hegemony is primarily associated with Antonio Gramsci, despite the fact that he did not develop its concrete definition before his death. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use McAllister’s (1996) definition:

Hegemony refers to a circumstance where the power differential of a social system is made to appear natural and inevitable. For those with power and those without power, the system is hegemonic when the power difference appears to be the natural order of things: the way things have always been done, always are done and always will be done (p. 58-59).

What has been normalized and situated as “American” is the legacy of European colonialism, when “a distinctive, gendered, European bourgeois self developed. This self emerged in the racialized and sexualized context of colonialism that generated social boundaries around what it meant to be ‘truly European’” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 111). Despite social progressions, one look into majority of the boardrooms at Fortune 500 companies,
government agencies, or academic institutions and it is obvious that White patriarchy still reigns. Scholars like Edward Said “question how the power of knowledge production has been exercised in representing subordinated peoples against the norm of those in power” (as cited in Ramazanoglu & Holland, p. 108-109). These hegemonic social discourses have fixed Whiteness and capitalism as default, the standard which difference is measured against. Anything different is “other”. Counter hegemony on BET, then, is considered any discourse that somehow privileges some form of “other”, exposes hegemony or challenges or resists subjugating binaries.

I prefer the concept of hegemony to notions of false-consciousness for many reasons. One specifically being it leaves room for resistance. I want to be clear that I do not believe that we are dupes who absorb BET or other mediated content without question. Nor do I suggest malice, conspiracy or blame on the part of any contemporary social group or organization. This study presents one interpretation of some discourses that manifest within this channel, and does not assume that the creators or viewers are aware of, or agree with them. However, there is great value in considering the implications of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic messages that oppressed groups are exposed to.

The Research Questions, which guide the analysis, are:

RQ1: What are the different ways that identity is constructed through consumption and commodity fetishism on BET? Both Chapter 4 and 5 address this RQ.

RQ2: What commonalities and differences of consumption identity exist between the different textual categories (programs, commercials, program promotions) on BET? Chapter 5 will primarily examine this RQ.

RQ3: Are there counter-hegemonic representations of consumption and identity in the sample and, if so, what form do they take? Both Chapter 4 and 5 address this RQ.

RQ4: Given the socioeconomic realities, what might we conclude about the hegemonic implications of Black identity and consumption on BET? Chapters 4, 5 and 6 address this RQ.
Chapter 4

THE FETISHISM PHENOMENON: AN ANALYSIS OF BET’S THE BLACK CARPET, THE BOOT & BALDWIN HILLS

There are three facets of consumer culture that manifest in the three television programs that ultimately fetishize the socioeconomic realities that exist within Black society, with each program emphasizing a different facet. First, BET sets out to fashion an ideology of African American social elitism by devising a Black Gilded Age in *The Black Carpet*. The second is branding and commodifying the self in the metaphorical marketplace on *The Boot*. Finally, the third facet is an attempt to convince audiences that “Not all Black people live in the ghetto” by focusing on wealthy teenagers on *Baldwin Hills*. This latter program is in some ways the most complex and offers certain counter-hegemonic messages (if limited). Because BET narrowcasts to a niche audience of African Americans, these aspects of consumption become “naturally” linked to Black identity and thus have implications for racial and economic hegemony. This chapter will detail these three naturalized consumption motifs.

*The Black Carpet* as a Vision of The Black Gilded Age

Using its position as a cultural facilitator, BET works to conceptualize and mainstream a new ideology of African American elitism. The celebrity and entertainment news show *The Black Carpet* acts as a canon for the Black bourgeoisie by codifying society standards that assure economic and cultural distance from the Black proletariat. As signified by its hybrid title, this program combines markers of race and class: the markings of celebrity culture (such as the red carpet) act as an entryway into a desirable, class-conscious Blackness. Hence, *The Black Carpet*
offers itself as a high society handbook - a Who’s Who in African American society that accesses
exclusive society events, dictates standards in fashion, arts and entertainment, and celebrates an
overall exhibition in conspicuous consumption. While this television tabloid presents itself as
celebrating racial minorities who have “made it”, it incidentally naturalizes its messages of
materialism and overindulgence by failing to address such lifestyles as atypical for the great
majority of African Americans due to sociohistorical circumstances beyond their control.

Using *The Black Carpet* as a venue, BET takes ownership of a culture many Blacks had
previously derogatorily labeled as “bourgie” and rendered it into a new Gilded Age - a Black
Gilded Age using three primary techniques: first, by redefining Black high art, second by
proclaiming the African American elite and third, by illustrating the lifestyle of conspicuous
consumption.

**Redefining Black High Culture**

The discourse of self-aggrandizement in *The Black Carpet* implies the show’s
acceptance as part of the upper-crust. It therefore positions itself as an authority in molding elite
culture. Ultimately, the program works to reposition Black popular entertainment as high art by
focusing on White hegemonic standards of status and legitimation through the valorization of
certain ideals: self written and produced material, associations and collaborations with
entertainers already regarded as “artists”, demonstrating talent on cue (free from mechanical
assistance), and connections to socially established high culture, or to forms of Whiteness
generally.

For example, *The Black Carpet* hones the palate for Black high art by spotlighting new
artists who have unique styles compared to current popular Black music. New singer/songwriters,
like Santo Gold, are featured in *The Black Carpet’s* Spotlight segment (July 24, 2008 episode)
and discuss how their music differs from the music of the masses. According to Gold, her musical style is too broad to be classified since it contains a blend of influences, which she lists as “dub...punk rock, some electronic...indie rock, a little hip hop (18:57).” “I’m trying to do something that’s fresh...that really opens some doors so that” there may be a place in the industry for Black artists who are not creating R&B or hip hop. Santogold twice describes her unconventional approach to and style of music as “fresh”, implicating the current popular as “stale” in contrast (19:02). In this way, “cutting edge” is signaled by a “cross-over” appeal, and by new artists using conventional music genres associated with White culture, in this case coded as “indie rock.”

Besides cross-over appeal, high art is also defined by the entrepreneurial spirit, especially in the music industry. The Black Carpet interviews rapper T-Pain who is promoting his upcoming album, placing great emphasis on his role as the sole lyricist and lead producer of the project: as an “auteur” (July 31, 2008). During the interview T-Pain explains he “produced and wrote 100% of this whole album, as (with) the rest of the albums” (3:08). He adds, “Until people see me as a producer...” and “as a writer I’m going to keep doing 100%”. He also points out the respect that he has earned from peers in the industry through his collaborations with artists such as Lil’ Wayne. In the ensuing interview, R&B singer Lloyd (July 31, 2008) is also prompted to discuss his association with the “artist” Lil’ Wayne and then excitedly describes his role on his upcoming album. “It is the first time that I have actually produced on my own music”, Lloyd says (5:02). And at the hostess Danella’s request he sings to her and the camera an a cappella serenade. Later in the same episode, Danella interviews R&B singer Robin Thicke, asking the same questions regarding musical associations and his creative leadership. He explains his new album is stylistically multicultural - being inspired by “A little bossa nova, a little Sade...a little Curtis” (14:25). He also discusses being inspired by those he has collaborated with, such as Mary J. Blige, whom he paints as music royalty, and of course, Lil’ Wayne. Thicke also confirms his
authenticity as a writer when he tells Danella about writing his first song as an eleven year old. The interview concludes with Thicke giving a spontaneous a cappella rendition of his latest song, “Magic”. In this way, the image of the cultural worker is that of the entertainer working with other artists to produce art. They have complete artistic agency, and the economic mechanisms of the cultural industry are downplayed or completely absent.

Although hip hop culture originated as a form of antiestablishment expression, The Black Carpet works to unite it with dominant culture by measuring and then filtering hip hop by classical Western standards. It is an attempt at removing the old stigmas of rap music using seasoned popular rappers. This is demonstrated by the numerous mentions of New Orleans rapper Lil’ Wayne who in a particular episode (July 31, 2008) is discussed or shown more than a half dozen times throughout the program. By using Lil’ Wayne, who first came to fame in the 1990s, The Black Carpet insists on a redefinition of certain rap as innovative and therefore artistic, despite its mainstream popularity. By repackaging a rapper like Lil’ Wayne as an artist who has been integrated and accepted into the arts, Black Carpet presents hip hop as less threatening. They minimize framing these rappers and hip hop as aspects of a rebellious subculture and instead frame them as not much different than classic American artists who are no threat to the industry or the hegemony.

The show uses other seasoned popular entertainers and plays up their progressive embracing of highbrow culture, like literature and museums. In one episode, host Touré interviews Grand Master Flash who is promoting his coauthored book, The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash: My Life, My Beats (2008), in which he details his role in the genesis of rap and hip hop. In the same episode, MC Lyte, another rap pioneer of the 80s, is interviewed regarding her contribution of her old diary and MC equipment to the Smithsonian for its new exhibit about hip hop. With its redefinition of Black high culture the program accepts, exalts and even glamorizes Western ideologies that have been normalized into what is now seen as
American or Whiteness under European imperialism, and is therefore actually assimilative. In light of this, The Black Carpet tries to distract the viewer from realizing the assimilative nature of the show by decontextualizing and depoliticizing Black entertainment - especially hip hop - from its controversial history so it is then neutralized. The Black Carpet has found a formula that successfully balances a dichotomy that is perhaps (consciously or subconsciously) inherent in every social hierarchy - wanting to fit in, but not wanting to be seen as a sellout. As a subsidiary of Viacom, BET sits in a unique position within the culture industry. It is proclaiming itself as not only the dominant source for Black entertainment, but as an elite organization that offers Black entertainment.

The discourse of redefining, legitimizing and mainstreaming carries many implications. At its core it attempts to dissociate African American music from its stigmatized reputation of the past by highlighting any resemblances of Western high art and culture and therefore Whiteness in order to render it less threatening to the dominant.

Proclaiming the Black Elite

With The Black Carpet, BET helps determine the members of the African American upper crust regarded for exclusivity, status, social connections and high profile events, and positions itself to the audience as the de facto entrée point to the upper echelons. The level of one’s status is signified through name repetition and shots on a red carpet. Additionally, celebrities are also legitimized as prestigious by being associated with luxury brands much more popular in White than Black culture. In the short segment called “The Black Carpet Buzz,” the viewer is bombarded with such brands, relaying news of a new endorsement deal between Kanye West and Louis Vuitton (July 31, 2008); Italian Vogue’s tribute edition to African American models - including Black Carpet co-host Tocarra - which viewers are told sold out in major U.S.
cities (July 31, 2008); and Vanity Fair’s rankings of Kanye West and Michelle Obama on its best dressed list (July 31, 2008). There is also high value given to recognition by valorized organizations that are often linked to tradition and status. For example, one episode names all African American actors earning nominations for the annual Emmy Awards. Another mention is of Michelle Obama being made an honorary member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, one of America’s most powerful Black sororities (July 24, 2008).

Philanthropy and society events also receive high status marks while at the same time encouraging good feelings for this cultural elite. In the “Flashing Lights” segment of the program, celebrities are recognized for ‘giving back’. In one episode (July 31, 2008) the young entertainer Mario is recognized for his philanthropic Do Right Foundation’s national drug prevention youth advocacy program and is shown promoting and visiting at the Harlem Boys & Girls Club. The same segment highlights actress Sanaa Lathan’s participation in the non-profit group HerShe’s Cinderella Ball, a debutante event held at LA’s Museum of Natural History where teenage foster girls are ‘presented to society’. We are also given access into Russell Simmons’ annual “Art for Life” fundraising gala at his East Hampton, NY estate, attended by major politicians, journalists, designers, etc (July 31, 2008). Adding in a corporate presence is the McDonald’s 365 Black Awards, where actor Hill Harper, former Spelman president Johnnetta Cole and former BET journalist Ed Gordon were recognized as Blacks who have contributed significantly to America (August 14, 2008).

The Black elite are reinforced by discussions of individuals’ economic achievements and personal lives. During an interview (August 14, 2008) with a celebrity astrologer, hostess Danella asks, “Let’s start off with Jay-Z. He is always getting bigger and better, richer and richer. What is his next big move?” In the same episode is the gossip correspondent Egypt’s segment “Under the Rug”, in which she reveals that while it is yet to be confirmed, supermodel and media mogul Tyra Banks is rumored to be engaged to “mega millionaire investment banker” John Utendahl. The
delayed confirmation, she adds, is because of ongoing talks to secure a prenuptial agreement, prompting Egypt to ask why such a document is necessary when both parties are “crazy rich”, adding that even Jay-Z and Beyonce opted out of a prenup given their mutual wealth.

As implied by the above, this focus on the combination of romance and wealth is common on *The Black Carpet*, and, when violated, is framed as a faux pas. Egypt expresses her confusion with why Usher, of R&B fame, “who could pretty much have any beautiful, young, famous girl that he wanted...married someone that nobody would have expected” by wedding Tameka Foster, a working class hair stylist (July 17, 2008). In a similar vein (July 24, 2008), Egypt's announcement that N.E.R.D. member Pharrell is rumored to have “impregnated a model type” implies the nameless woman has no celebrity status and is therefore deemed generic in contrast to the social standards.

*Illustrating the Lifestyle of Conspicuous Consumption*

*The Black Carpet* overflows with symbolic images of wealth - or conspicuous consumption -- which ultimately work to reinforce its discourse of class difference. One consistent depiction of conspicuous consumption is through the display of fashion, with designer labels routinely signaled. In one episode (July 31, 2008) hostess Danella lists the lady celebrities who made fashion statements on the red carpet, awarding “the look of the week” to *Swing Vote* actress Paula Patton who according to Danella looked “gorgeous in an orange Versace strapless dress” at the film’s LA premiere. Of course, the host and hostesses also wear opulent attire, and in fact, this is arguably more central to their image than in analogous programs such as *Entertainment Tonight*. According to the end credits, Danella’s wardrobe consists of high fashion brands such as Badgley Mischka, Cesare Paciotti and Henri Bendel, and Touré’s of J Brand, Rufus and Prada (July 17 & 24, 2008).
In every episode celebrity-owned luxury brands are mentioned, like Simmons’ trademark line Baby Phat, Sean “Diddy” Combs’ new fragrance, I Am King, and Pharrell Williams’ two high-end clothing lines, Ice Cream and Billionaire Boys Club (August 14, 2008). Even the debut of PB & Caviar, a New York boutique owned by Bill Cosby’s daughter, Evin, receives red carpet billing (August 14, 2008). When non-luxury, celebrity-driven brands are mentioned, they also become vehicles for passing as rich. *The Black Carpet* takes on back-to-school shopping during the 2008 economic crisis by spotlighting Fabulosity, Kimora Lee Simmons’ new juniors clothing line for JCPenney (August 14, 2008). During her red carpet interview Simmons relays that Fabulosity garment prices range “from $20 to $120, so you can mix and match” and “get a complete outfit for $100. I want to show people that you can be fabulous...over the top, energetic, sexy and fun - on a dime.” The segment continues with teen actress Keke Palmer guiding viewers through Macy’s for essential back-to-school fashions, including accessorizing vests and stilettos.

The prevalence of other status symbols like champagne and jewelry contribute to the theme of conspicuous consumption. On the 100th episode (July 17, 2008), the show concludes with the hosts, dressed to their finest, toasting “bubbly” - or champagne - ushering in the spirit of Robin Leach and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Celebrities like Nelly, Lloyd and Kimora Lee Simmons sport ostentatious diamond and gold jewelry in interviews and still images. During gossip correspondent Egypt’s recap of Mariah Carey’s spontaneous marriage to entertainer Nick Cannon we are shown a still shot of Carey displaying her adorned ring finger - but to further emphasize the value of the relationship the camera then pronouncedly zooms to an extreme close up of Carey’s ring multiple times (July 17, 2008).

The message of wealth is further signified by the settings and spaces *The Black Carpet* employs. With the show’s focus on red carpet events, celebrities most often appear in front of a backdrop which carries the logo(s) of the event sponsors. GQ, Donna Karan, Mercedes-Benz, Macy’s, Emporio Armani, KLS (Kimora Lee Simmons), Audi, Baby Phat and Sean John are
merely a sample of the high-end sponsors seen over the shoulders of the red carpet attendees within the first five minutes of one episode (July 17, 2008). Of course, the placement of these logos carries additional implications for the role of advertising during the program, but that discussion shall be saved for chapter five.

In the program, the studio space's decorum is minimalist and trendy with a soft red floor and a black carpet walkway complete with the VIP enforcing velvet rope (in black). The most eye-catching feature is a video wall made of four large plasma televisions tiled together for displaying *The Black Carpet* logo, videos and graphics to accompany certain stories. Even the digital logo itself is suggestive of extravagance with half of its large block letters covered in animated diamonds and the other half in red carpet velvet - completing the graphic is a shimmering gold background.

In summary, *The Black Carpet* ultimately borrows the established ideology of Western elitism and molds contemporary Black popular culture around it. The show tries to redefine African American entertainment as art by pointing out any reflections of the Western standards of artistry, social class and wealth. However, in *The Black Carpet* hip hop and other diaspora genres are not completely stripped of their cultural and political contexts; these contexts are merely sidelined as secondary so as to not overshadow or threaten Whiteness. Hence, this discourse confirms that despite different races’ unequal circumstances, minority achievement is still measured according to an antiquated Western scale.

*The Boot: A Metaphorical Marketplace*

*The Boot’s* hostess, MC Lyte, sets up the scenario of the reality television program:

Two guys put four ladies to the test. First, they face interrogation...Two girls get the quick boot while the other two move on. Next... each man runs the ladies through his own private challenge. Another girl gets booted and we’re left with
only one...The last woman standing flips the script on the fellas. One dude gets the boot and the other one gets his queen (July 18, 2009; 1:21).

As stated in chapter three, *The Boot* is produced by Renegade 83 Productions, the same studio behind the syndicated dating show, *Blind Date*. According to DeRose, Fürsich and Haskins (2003, p. 171), *Blind Date* is “a hybrid between traditional dating game show, reality television footage, and supertext-enhanced *Pop-Up Video*”. As a result of their production ties *The Boot* borrows many of its predecessor’s conventions. Like *Blind Date*, *The Boot* includes an authorial supertext – an audio-visual based running commentary appearing throughout the segment that provides comic relief and adds another layer of meaning to the text at hand, and may appear as pop-up cartoons or text, sound-effects, running gags or thoughts from the producers. The supertexts in both shows are hegemonic, and “aim to reinforce stereotypically desirable characteristics for partner selection, related to gender, class, and ethnic representations, by framing the divergent participants via the supertext in a manner that comically punishes deviance from hegemonic norms” (DeRose, Fürsich & Haskins, p. 172). With this is mind, on its surface *The Boot* appears simplistic, but further scrutiny reveals that within its texts and supertexts are the defining standards of cultural norms in the dominant ideology. Viewers impressions and counter-hegemonic readings of the contestants are framed and therefore restricted by the supertext. Participants in Renegade 83’s reality dating productions are “framed as comic scapegoats” whose non-conventional idiosyncrasies are zeroed in on and exaggerated by the super-text (DeRose, Fürsich & Haskins, p. 176). Hence, the audience is encouraged to join in on the laughs at the expense of any contestant who strays from the social norm. And unlike *Blind Date*, the emphases on persuasion/competition, and the racial context of the program, add unique ideological dimensions to this program.

In *The Boot*, race, gender and commodification collide. Just one of the many discourses of consumption that manifests in *The Boot* is African Americans branding and selling themselves
as commodities. Therefore, *The Boot* operates as a metaphorical marketplace in three ways: first, it constructs its narrative according to the logic of capitalism; second it frames women as branded commodities; and finally it frames men as consumers. For the purposes of length this analysis will focus specifically on segments of the July 18, 2008 episode to illustrate the above trends, with this episode being indicative of the program generally.

Much like in the actual consumer market, the female contestants on *The Boot* aim to stand out as unique by branding themselves according to what they believe the customer, in this case Black men, desire. The contestants therefore compete by selling a particular and essentializing part of their body that they hope will be deemed stimulating - and ultimately win the guy in the end. However, the women do not market themselves alone - they are assisted by the producers and the supertext. In this particular installment, *The Boot* frames the males, Jaz and D.O., as normal; it is the women who are given the critical assessment, and the ones who transgress beyond the ideals of the men are made into jokes. Like its sister show, *Blind Date*, the metaphorical marketplace of *The Boot* works to “invoke accepted notions of aesthetics, economics, social, and intellectual abilities and to punish participants’ deviations from these norms” (DeRose, Fürsich & Haskins, 2003, p. 177).

The first contestant is Candice, who is branded and valued by her breasts. Candice first enters the interrogation room wearing a second-skin low-cut tank top and mini skirt. Her initial body language and avoidance of eye contact give Jaz and D.O. the impression that she is uptight, so D.O. begins the conversation by making a request, “Loosen up for me”? Candice does not respond with words, but instead by grinning and then shaking her chest, a gesture which is accompanied by a sound effect of jingling bells. Clearly entertained, Jaz and D.O. erupt into laughter. Candice then speaks for the first time asking, “Loose enough?” The show then cuts to a split-screen shot with Candice as a talking head on the right, and on the left is a bulleted list of three things to know - which may be interpreted as selling points - about Candice: 1) “She’s
bringing sexy back” 2) “Never been dumped” and 3) “Flat broke”. In her direct address interview, Candice reveals to the audience her plan for winning the competition, which is to let Jaz and D.O. “get to know ‘The Girls’” - otherwise known as her breasts - which she emphasizes by grabbing and shaking. She continues, “No one can turn down ‘The Girls’”, which she reinforces by repeating the gesture. Throughout the program Candice presents herself as being superficial, self-absorbed and expects men to spoil her. In return, she offers her breasts as her brand quality, or, to use a common advertising concept, her USP (Unique Selling Proposition).

 Contestant number two is Princess, who is branded as a brain. To clearly signal Princess as ‘the intellectual,’ her conversation is edited to highlight academic and career oriented clips. Of all four contestants she is the only one who is said to be in school (of course it is unknown if this is actually the case). Princess begins the interrogation by introducing herself to Jaz and D.O. explaining that she is a neuroscience major with a minor in French. She also tells them that she aspires to become an ambassador one day. In her split-screen scene the supertext’s three selling points for Princess notes that she: 1) Is a “student activist” 2) “Speaks the language of love” and 3) “Likes to travel for free”. In the juxtaposing head shot, she tries to sell her intellect by seductively speaking French to the camera.

 Empress, the third contestant, is clearly value branded as a pair of lips. When switched to the split screen the supertext provides three selling points about Empress: 1) “Diva-licious” 2) “Loves to be loud” and 3) “Hates quiet people”. She explains she did not come on the show with a strategy for winning, because she does not need one - strategies are for people lacking in talent; she knows what she is doing, she says to the camera. Empress seems constantly conscious of how her mouth is displayed making sure her lips are always puckered or pursed whether she is talking or just posing. “Who would turn these down? You would be a fool to do so. See look” (9:47). She then looks into the camera with a posed pucker.
In addition to being branded as a pair of sexually suggestive lips, Empress adds an additional brand image of herself - the dutiful girlfriend. Throughout the program she depicts herself as a woman fully willing to serve her male partner in domestic fashions like cooking his favorite foods and prioritizing his sexual satisfaction, all while remaining fashionable.

The fourth and final contestant, Jauntae, is branded as the “thick” body. Initially, Jauntae explains her strategy for success is to “win them over” with her “charm, sex appeal and smile”, however it is evident from the supertext that the producers aim to brand her differently, and list Jauntae’s three key selling points as: 1) “Easy going” 2) “Likes to experiment” and 3) “Thick as gravy”. Jauntae ultimately ends up subscribing to this angle of being “thick” and chooses to focus on this as her key selling point for the remainder of the show, which will be discussed in more detail later. Jaz and D.O. clearly take interest in her exterior, noting her beauty when she enters the room for the interrogation. “She is so cute...The prettiest one here today!” says Jaz.

As the consumers within this metaphorical marketplace, Jaz and D.O. conduct various consumer tests to determine the most appealing commodity and to select which two should be eliminated. The women use these trial opportunities to further market themselves by emphasizing the top qualities with which they have branded themselves. The first is a segment created by the show called The X-Ray Chamber, an interrogation room in which they question the women to assess their desirability. In the chamber, Jaz and D.O. ask the contestants three questions: 1) How do you handle your anger? 2) Ever been with a girl? 3) Can you cook?

The supertext constructs Princess as the least valuable commodity of all. During her response to the question, “Ever been with a girl?” she diverts her response and instead chooses a diplomatic answer to explain the importance of world interaction and political activism. The supertext communicates an understood contempt toward her response by adding mundane accordion music, yawning sound effects and a cartoon graphic of Jaz and D.O. dozing off in bunk-beds as she speaks. Princess is thus the first contestant dismissed in the elimination round -
according to Jaz, she is too boring. Why was Princess considered boring? Or better yet, what about this participant was so unappealing? According to the supertext her role as an academic is problematic. The supertext places her head on a cartoon body dressed in a cap and gown while holding a diploma, accompanied by a sound-byte of her previous snooze-inducing speech; in an unapologetic fashion an animated boot swings down and literally kicks her off the screen - complete with a sound effect of her screaming into the distance. Princess was branded and marketed as an academic - and ultimately the consumers, Jaz and D.O. concluded that the educated woman was the least valuable commodity.

During Candice’s interrogation she uses the questions as opportunities to promote herself as having status, saying that she receives V.I.P. provisions every time she goes to a nightclub. However, her attempt to project herself as holding great social status ultimately backfires as the men do not believe her. She also reveals that she expects full access to a boyfriend’s credit card, she sees nothing wrong with calling the police over a lover’s quarrel and she does not cook. Candice confidently flaunts the spoiled persona, but based on Jaz and D.O.’s body language and direct address comments they clearly grow more and more annoyed and appalled with her the more she reveals. She is revealing herself as an expensive and even dangerous brand. However, her value is redeemed when the conversation switches back to her main selling point - even though it is unrelated to the question at hand - her chest. Jaz asks, “Are those you?” gesturing with his eyes and body language to her chest. Candice looks down, grabs her breasts and replies, “Yeah these are me!” Jaz then says, “Thought they was plastic.” D.O. then adds, “They are nice! Jesus did his thing.” She proudly agrees and reiterates that her breasts are perfect, something she cannot help she was just “born this way”. Nevertheless, despite the commodity appeal of Candice’s physical assets she is not able to sell herself as anything more than breasts, and becomes the second of the four woman to receive the boot after round one. The supertext dramatizes Candice’s eviction with an animation that starts by showing her head on a cartoon
body with exaggeratedly large breasts, destroyed when two large boots come from either side and collide, smashing her entire body - all of her body, that is, except for the caricatured breasts. Based on this message from the supertext, while it may be enjoyable, a large chest is not a valuable enough commodity to balance out the money they perceive may be lost on a woman with expensive taste.

After the first elimination is another round of consumer testing called The Gut Check, in which the men determine which contestant best meets their particular needs. In this segment, the aspiring rapper D.O. asks the two finalists, Empress and Jauntae, to write a rap verse about him, while aspiring actor Jaz tasks the women to help him rehearse *Romeo & Juliet*.

Jauntae passed the first round easily, because she says, the guys “like all this thickness”, which is confirmed by the guys’ comments. She also made an early impression on D.O. for stating she has been intimate with a woman. The supertext highlights the value of her racy tale of sexual experimentation by switching to an angelic musical score. D.O. even says to the camera, in his direct address interview, “I’ve been waiting on a girl like you all day!” However, the serene vibe is halted when she says she is not interested in letting a male join in on the adventure, emphasized by a screeching sound effect and D.O.’s expressed annoyance. During the Gut Check, she fails to demonstrate any lyrical flair when writing a rhyme for D.O. In fact, the only compliment Jauntae earns from D.O. during his evaluation is him staring at her chest and stating he likes “her shirt”. In Jauntae’s narrative interview she responds, “He is not looking at my shirt. He is looking at these,” and points to her cleavage, which the supertext haloes along with saintly sound effects. To summarize Jauntae’s lackluster rap skills the hostess MC Lyte explains, “Jauntae, you’ve got to spend some more time in the hood girl!” During her acting lesson with Jaz, Jauntae struggles with *Romeo & Juliet*, so she redirects his attention toward her key selling point - her “thickness”. After leading his eyes down her body she pushes herself against him, to which he responds by grabbing hold of her backside. In the post-date interview Jaz explains, “I
wasn’t even paying attention to ‘Tae, but she got a big ‘ole booty so you know I was peeping that!’ Despite her final sales pitch, Jauntae gets the boot in the second elimination round.

In the end, Empress is chosen the winner because she successfully brands herself in accordance to “the needs and wants of the consumer” (McAllister, 1996, p. 53). Like the other women, she is branded as a component of the female body, which she works hard to sell. She overtly emphasizes her lips as her “greatest assets” and even proclaims her devotion and skill in providing her man with oral sex. In one of the most provocative exchanges during the interrogation Empress proudly reveals her prized assets (4:58):

D.O: You ever been with a girl?
Empress: No (puckers her lips). Strictly d**ks! (Guys react excitedly).
D.O: I see them lips!
Empress: You know!? That’s one of my greatest assets!
D.O: Oh my gosh! (Both men anxiously squirm in their seats).

Moments later in her direct address interview, Empress adds, “I know they get b*ners when they see these things” (5:08)! The supertext even caricatures this theme by digitally inflating her lips like balloons on several occasions.

At the same time Empress proudly boasts her feminine gendered and domestic qualities, telling the camera, “I’m a sharp dresser and I’ve got a little class, and I can cook too!? Please, there’s no way I’m going to get the boot!” Kitchen skills, she says, are “pertinent”. “I can cook. It’s one of my passions!” She also explains how she deals with anger - she goes shoe shopping. Of the four women, Empress is the only one who handles her anger in a non-confrontational way. Candice, Princess and Jauntae each say they respond with either violence or law enforcement, but Empress opts for the stereotypically gendered passive route.
However, these qualities and skills Empress flaunts actually show her as complacent. In fact, Empress’s domestic submissiveness, her enthusiasm in putting her man’s needs first, and of course her much discussed mouth and its guarantee of oral pleasure merely model the social constructions of labor, duty and submission expected of a woman for her man. Therefore, the commodity that the men actually seek and purchase is the dutiful girlfriend. Together, *The Boot*, its participants and the supertext hegemonically reinforce the ideological standards of patriarchal capitalism through the validation of Empress’s performance and the men’s simultaneous rejections of the other women. Hence, the message conveyed is that to the Black male, dutifulness - as modeled by Empress - is the most valuable commodity.

*Baldwin Hills: Not All Black People Live in the Ghetto*

*Baldwin Hills* is packaged as a reality show about rich African American kids leading rich lives. According to a BET press release “*Baldwin Hills* redefines what it means to be young and privileged in Los Angeles as it follows the everyday lives of a group of African American
teens from a very real and very exclusive enclave called Baldwin Hills” (BET’s Baldwin Hills, 2008). Based on the promotions Baldwin Hills was created as BET’s equivalent to shows like MTV’s Laguna Beach, which follows wealthy White teens through experiences in the leisure class. BET aims to show that African Americans can and do live the same lives of leisure displayed on Laguna Beach, a sentiment echoed in the opening credit sequence when cast member Sal states, “Not all Black people live in the ghetto”. The development of Baldwin Hills carries an implication that class, lifestyle and even geographic setting can supersede the challenges of race. However, the sociohistorical power of race proves to be too difficult to mute and the producers are forced to deal with it as an unavoidable narrative throughout the series.

The overt focus on wealth is presented through several people in Baldwin Hills. Lor’Rena is often depicted in settings of conspicuous leisure, like entertaining by the pool or having her eyebrows done at a spa. Many of her more intimate discussions are with her sister while shopping, at makeup counters, over dessert, etc. Lor’Rena appears to be spoiled, as she consistently wants things to be done her way. Interestingly, she is also a successful high school track star, but this component of her character is minimized. What is most notable about Lor’Rena is her dramatic and confrontational personality, which situates her as the Baldwin Hills “mean girl”.

Lor’Rena’s primary love interest throughout season two is Moriah, the resident good-looking, popular, basketball star of the Baldwin Hills neighborhood. As the son of a former professional basketball player, Moriah feels heavy pressure to follow his father’s path to UCLA and then the NBA. He appears to be living in comfortable wealth, as we see him riding in the family Mercedes-Benz, jogging through gated communities and even chatting with buddies over a game of golf. Moriah is the central point of tension between Lor’Rena and another major character, Gerren - even causing the girls to have a minor physical confrontation.
Gerren is a prodigy fashion model who “made it” in the elite fashion industry at an unusually young age. According to BET’s website, Gerren is “a teen beauty who...has appeared on the cover of countless teen magazines, plus Italian Vogue and Elle. Oprah calls her the ‘Mini Naomi’”. On Baldwin Hills Gerren is used to fulfill many of the initial tropes for duplicating Laguna Beach, often showing her as a stereotypical, self-absorbed, shallow and mean teenage girl. Backstage following one of Gerren’s fashion shows she deceives her mother, Michele (who is also her manager), into letting her wear a purple dress she modeled on the runway to a party she will attend that night where her ex-boyfriend Moriah and rival Lor’Rena will be among the guests. “Mom, you have to let me wear this dress to the party tonight. I have to make an entrance... Did you see how everybody reacted when I came out on the runway? That’s how cute the dress is” (July 29, 2008; 8:56)!

Gerren is also framed to illustrate these Black teens’ fluid access to glamour and high society in Los Angeles - her character is ultimately developed into the “It” girl. For instance, as she makes a fashionably late entrance to a loft party where the other cast members are already in attendance, the filming and editing techniques paint her as a leading lady of classic Hollywood (July 29, 2008; 21:21). Her entrance is well pronounced, set to up-tempo music and mixed with shots of partygoers looking up as she catches their eye or walks by. The lighting and slanted camera angles clearly distinguish her from the others in the room. In fact, even her walk across the party floor looks like a well styled fashion show. She quickly becomes the topic of conversation among the guests and her cast mates, especially with her rival Lor’Rena, who is noticeably jealous, as the model makes her rounds through the room distributing hugs and kisses. The cinematic style clearly works to perpetuate the character of Gerren as a person of value for having achieved fame and status.
Contradicting the Genre

Despite the intention to minimize the differences between rich kids of different races, the producers face a unique challenge. In this program the "rich kids reality TV" sub-genre ultimately collides with the truth about racial history and how it manifests in various ways each day. By basing a program on the economic positions of a group of African Americans the show unleashes more than expected, and Black America’s socioeconomic legacies and realities impose themselves on the text. Interestingly, the show’s producers choose to embrace the challenge as it unfolds by developing the discourses that are contradictory to the genre norms.

*Baldwin Hills* spotlights socioeconomic difficulties by using characters such as Staci as narrative devices. Staci is one of few cast members returning from season one - however, she faces new challenges in the second season. In fact, Staci stands as the symbol of the same financial strife that many minorities experience daily. Staci comes from a lower class family and has recently started attending college to reach her goal of being a fashion executive. Unfortunately she is unable to afford her combined tuition and living expenses and her family can provide her with no financial assistance. She also lives with her boyfriend in his mother’s house, where they are unwelcome and mistreated; however they cannot afford to move out. Additionally, she has no credit to be able to get a home, so they must rely on her boyfriend’s credit when they can afford to move out. Staci goes store to store searching for work. Her friend Seiko offers to help her get a job at Hooter’s and even suggests she go beg Gerren for a link into the fashion industry (July 15, 2008; 7:49, 8:40). When her friend Sal’s uncle tells her he can connect her to a once in a lifetime internship she is ecstatic - but her hopes are devastated when he tells her it is an unpaid internship (July 15, 2008; 5:47). He reminds her that the long-term benefits would require immediate sacrifices, but would undoubtedly be worth it. Even though Staci understands the priceless benefits implied in taking the internship her finances force her to turn it down. Staci
eventually interviews (using borrowed clothes from Seiko) and gets a job with an after school program for lower income youth, earning $13/hour (July 22, 2008; 26:24).

Johnathan, a star football player recently accepted to UCLA on an athletic scholarship, is another cast member who does not have obvious wealth; in fact he and his mother live in a modest, lower-middle class apartment. However, he perceives his football scholarship as his “ticket” to the American Dream, picturing himself on track to the NFL and the new life that it will buy him. While Johnathan may not be a member of the upper class, he has an affinity for the high life. For instance, when working to persuade Lor’Rena to be his prom date, Johnathan explains how valuable she is by comparing her to expensive cars (August 5, 2008; 4:00). He explains, “If I just wanted to take any old hooptie I could have.” Lor’Rena replies, “Hooptie? So what am I? Your Mercedes-Benz?” “Yeah, you’re all that, my Lamborghini…” “I’m a Bentley!” she interjects. Lor’Rena ultimately ends up saying yes. Johnathan even rides away from his family’s pre-prom “champagne party” to the dance in a stretch Hummer limousine. Interestingly, the picture Johnathan paints of his lifestyle is inconsistent with the lifestyle he seems to actually live.

With portrayals like Staci’s, Baldwin Hills does not completely eliminate imagery of working class Black America. In fact, viewers are reminded of the existing class binaries in other ways - through cinematography, editing and settings. In one episode we watch a scene with Staci and her friend Tee’Nee sitting in the courtyard of a lower income apartment complex discussing the hardships of parenthood. It then abruptly jumps to the next scene packed with shots of high-rise buildings, modern architecture and southern California palm trees (July 29, 2008; 7:13). Even the musical score swings from subtle filler music to an attention getting up-tempo hip hop tune. This scene leads us to the Ebony Fashion Show at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel and Shopping Gallery (8:46). After several quick shots of a few models we see Gerren take the runway in a stunning dress. As she walks up the runway the lyrics on the accompanying
soundtrack say, “I’m telling you she’s a diva/All I want to do is be her”. However, while we see establishing shots of palm trees and modern architecture, we are also shown industrial machinery and businesses in urban districts.

On *Baldwin Hills* the characters provide a very narrow glimpse of financial and professional “success”. The main focus tends to be on entertainment and sports careers, two realms often stereotypically linked to African Americans. Many of the main characters currently, or hope to one day, define themselves by a career in some realm of the culture industry. Gerren is a world renowned elite fashion model. Staci desires to work in the fashion industry and even (unsuccessfully) turns to Gerren - whom she dislikes - for possible connections (July 22, 2008). Justin is a member of BWB, a music production team which, he tells a fascinated Moriah, coined one of the biggest pop hits of the year, “Damaged” by Danity Kane (July 22, 2008). On a similar note, Sal aspires to be a music producer, but little has transpired. Johnathan has developed an ego that corresponds with his acceptance to UCLA on a football scholarship and a possible future in the pros. And Moriah, it seems, is almost ensured a pass to the NCAA basketball team of his choice, and before long to the NBA, just like his father.

On the other hand, career aspirations outside of the culture industries are less common with the cast. Seiko has attended culinary school to become a professional chef. And Ashley plans to attend Spelman College and then become a lawyer, a plan that is shot down by her mother’s best friend, actress Vivica Fox, who says disapprovingly, “That’s a lot of school!” (August 12, 2008; 15:00). However, another family friend, lawyer Star Jones, candidly yet reassuringly explains to Ashley how she worked her way up from a starting salary of $22,000 annually, which Fox then criticizes by saying, “You won’t buy too many outfits with that.”

However, Ms. Fox’s advice was not typical of the adults seen on *Baldwin Hills*. In many ways, non-cast member adults, particularly the parents and parent-figures, are used as narrative devices to raise and counteract stereotypes and issues in the Black community. This staging of
adult mentors who are actively involved in the daily lives of their teens is an attempt to counter the stereotype of the dysfunctional and disconnected African American family. The adults also offer these teens daily guidance and support on personal issues in an effort to reassure them of their identity or personal strength. For example, one afternoon while washing the family Mercedes-Benz, Moriah’s mother engages him in a conversation about his feelings regarding Gerren, his ex-girlfriend (July 29, 2008). Throughout the season the show gives minor indications that Moriah is a virgin, but the question is brought to the surface when his mother then awkwardly asks whether or not he is sexually active, to which he exclaims - slightly embarrassed, “No sex before marriage!” (16:11).

Sometimes these parent figures give the teens (staged) counseling and advising sessions about life, which they may not want to hear. We see this on several occasions between Sal, who wants to be a rapper and his Uncle Rob, whom Sal has just moved in with. In a voiceover preceding one particular scene (July 29, 2008; 3:00), Sal reveals, “Living with my Uncle Rob has its pros and cons. He knows I have dreams of hitting it big as a rapper. Sometimes I wish he would just chill!” Sal who is cleaning the pool, is then approached by Rob who asks how he is doing. “Oh I’m good man. Working and doing the music thing. Hopefully this year I should be platinum fo’ sho’.” His uncle disappointedly shakes his head, realizing that Sal needs to be briefed with the harsh truth. “The music game is like the NBA,” Rob explains. “One in almost millions of millions of chances that you’re going to make it.” Rob reassures his nephew that he does not doubt his talents and abilities to achieve his goal as a famous rapper, but tells him that his priority should be getting an education to fall back on. When Rob asks Sal, who appears disheartened, what his Plan B is, Sal says it is school. However, he believes school will interfere with his time for writing and recording his music, arguments which his uncle says are excuses. Rob lays it out for him suggesting if this is the path he truly wants he needs to establish a foundation for himself by taking writing classes. “School is going to better equip you to basically
have a career rather than a job.” Sal’s expressionless face and distant gaze show he is unprepared for such a bombshell. He prematurely ends the conversation by slowly walking away, claiming he needed to get something to eat.

With *Baldwin Hills* BET initially sought out to fill in the cultural gaps left by shows like MTV’s *Laguna Beach* by simply substituting one race for another, while still exhibiting the same lifestyles and experiences. However, *Baldwin Hills* is confronted with social circumstances that significantly alter the narrative. While it does capture the Black leisure class, it eliminates the contexts of most of the families’ upward mobility, such as any education, inheritance, careers and cultural capital that helped them to exceed the traps of class barriers. Hence, despite the potential that this show carries to possibly contribute to the advancements of the many lower class African Americans, it rather superficially simplifies this complexity to a refashioned story of the “haves-and-havenots”.

**Conclusion**

The three facets of consumer culture that arise as discourses in the sample of BET shows ultimately work to fetishize or hide the elephant in the room - the existing socioeconomic conditions in Black America. With *The Black Carpet*, BET naturalizes and mainstreams an ideology of elitism into African American society. However, a fundamental problem lies in the fact that bourgeoisie culture is virtually foreign to majority of the race. Predictably, the program chooses to not mention this fact beyond superficial levels. Even more problematic is the incessantly promoted discourse of ‘spend - don’t save’ as Black consumer and entertainment culture is celebrated, which may not be the best message for the economically disenfranchised to hear. *The Boot* fetishizes by merging the logic of capitalism and the branding of everyday life with the journey to find love. According to this show, women are the object of ridicule and
dispensable commodities who are objectified and marketed according to the desires of the Black male consumer. The idea of assessing a woman’s dispensability according to the perceived costs and/or incentives she offers to men turns the dating process into a metaphorical marketplace, and BET’s promotion of such behavior implicates them in indirectly acknowledging and enabling the growing phenomenon of men fleeing the roles of partners, husbands and fathers. Of the three shows sampled, *Baldwin Hills* provided the only contradictory, and hence more complex, discourse. While the show initially set out to demonstrate that not all Black people live in the ghetto, it is forced to redirect. Due to the nature of the program focusing on the overlap between the Black race and economic conditions, it is unable to completely fetishize inequality.

These programs are not autonomous texts, however. They are embedded in a context of commercials and promotions which also add to a larger commodity discourse. While this section analyzed the programming texts the next chapter will analyze the commercial content surrounding the programming that situate the overall discourse of consumption.
Chapter 5

**COMMODITY FLOW & THE PERSISTENCE OF CONSUMPTION ON BET**

The previous chapter focused on the relationship between commodity fetishism and racial identity in three programs found on BET. These programs, however, also have other commercial texts embedded within them, including product commercials and program promos. BET’s audience is inundated with themes, images and messages of consumption for the full 30 minutes of a show, and not just merely the show alone or just the commercial breaks, but the combination of the two. Therefore, this chapter analyzes the way BET illustrates how commercial television maintains a cocoon-like environment of consumption in and around a program, known as commodity flow, that promotes and enables the mindset of consumption and helps to normalize the ideology of capitalism.

This chapter breaks down commodity flow by first looking at the promotional content in programs and commercial texts, followed by network promotions, and finally the construction of identity through consumption and fetishization in commercials. The objective of this chapter is to examine if and how aspects of consumer culture are tied to signifiers of Blackness, thus showing a "natural" relationship between the two. Being that *The Black Carpet* is a program with consumer culture at its core, it is the primary focus of this particular analysis and is supplemented with discussion of *The Boot* and *Baldwin Hills*.

**Promotional Content in Programming and Commercial Texts**

Throughout the programs that were sampled commodities and brands were pushed through sponsorships, brand and product promotions and free publicity in the programs
themselves. These appeared in various televisual forms such as "bugs" (graphics appearing on-screen), background icons, images, mentions, video clips and more.

It should not be surprising that Black Carpet features the promotion of media brands: focusing on one episode (July 24, 2008), television shows, music and cinema features received significant promotional push and brand identification; this is indicative of all the episodes of this program in the sample. As noted in the previous chapter, the program itself is a 30-minute commodity promotion, and serves the function of defining notable entertainment brands for African Americans. For example, in the “New this Week” segment, the host, Torré, relays the new releases in entertainment the producers consider relevant to the viewers: “on stands Rap-Up magazine got a double-sided cover with Nelly on one side and Teyana Taylor, Kerri Hilson and Solange on the other; Usher’s on the cover of Essence holding the littlest Usher, and Rihanna is on the cover of In Style” (12:02); in CD stores are Black Mask, Black Gloves by Hell Rell and Nasti Muzik by Khia; “‘In the streets’ - B.G. & DJ Drama’s Hood Generals” (12:19); and new on DVD is Columbia Pictures’ film, 21. New in theaters are American Teen and X-Files: I Want to Believe; and “right now the number one film in America is The Dark Knight” (12:46). This quick survey of the entertainment industry prioritizes the marketplace simply through inclusions and exclusions in Torre’s list.

This particular episode came days after the 2008 Emmy award nominations allowing for popular television shows and movies to be discussed. Scenes and screen shots accompanied descriptions of TV programs like A Raisin in the Sun, Pictures of Hollis Woods, Ugly Betty; and for Grey’s Anatomy it also shows the Season 2 DVD box set cover (3:33). Black Carpet also reviewed African American actors among the nominees (3:40). The Emmy Award ceremony itself and - its contracted broadcaster - ABC network received heavy promotion.

Press junkets and on-set celebrity interviews help to push select entertainment projects on Black Carpet; such segments, of course, are designed to promote the current project of the
celebrity, but often they serve double promotional duty given the nature of cross-over and synergistic celebrities. In Gabrielle Union’s junket interview for her new film Meet Dave, she explains her enjoyment of actor Columbus Short [also her co-star in Cadillac Records (2008)] in the film Stomp the Yard, which she and the hostess Danella then discuss as we view several clips from the film (July 24, 2008, 10:46). Black Carpet and BET favorite Lil’ Wayne -- a multimedia brand -- attracted attention drawing the show to the set of his first major film, Hurricane Season.

In addition to the media brands promoted, however, there are also a surprising number of product mentions for non-media brands. This occurs in many ways, including the sponsorship of Black Carpet segments and stories that profile sponsored events. The Black Carpet features a variety of sponsored segments. For instance, the “Look of the Week” segment is sponsored by various companies like JCPenney and lists the best dressed African American female celebrities from the week’s red carpet events (July 24, 2008). The casual dining chain Red Robin sponsors The Black Carpet’s “Weekend Calendar” segment, which highlights one of the weekend’s new film releases. Vaseline receives indirect promotion thanks to coverage of Skin Stories, their sponsored documentary starring Sanaa Lathan about “how women of color around the world feel better about their skin” (July 24, 2008, 4:46). Entertainment events that attract celebrities and established brands receive attention, including the 2008 ESPY Awards - ESPN’s major sports awards ceremony, Staples Center, the Democratic National Convention, the New York Giants and more.

On the July 24 episode, Red Robin’s sponsored “Weekend Calendar” focuses on the new release Step Brothers in a 30-second promotion, which includes a selection of film clips, press junket interviews and more. In one particularly hypercommercial moment the television screen is inundated with product placements and heavy branding, such as Will Ferrell’s character dressed in a Mountain Dew t-shirt, the Red Robin bug occupying the top center of the screen, the film title centered at the bottom and the BET bug in the screen’s bottom right corner (13:15).
we see an example of a promotional quadruple, where media brands (BET, *Step Brothers*) and branded goods (Mountain Dew; Red Robin) both subordinate and compete for the same visual space. And because this is BET and *Black Carpet*, the message is that brands like *Step Brothers*, Mountain Dew, and Red Robin are brands that should be of interest to Black consumers (this despite the fact that *Step Brothers* features no African Americans in its promotions).

With a substantial portion of the show’s material coming from sponsored red carpet events *The Black Carpet* creates a uniquely abundant commodity stream in the form of free publicity. When corporations purchase a red carpet sponsorship their logo is plastered across the walkway’s backdrop guaranteeing their name to be captured and mediated by every camera in attendance. The result is promotional deals that are according to McAllister (1995, p. 201) naturally imperialistic, because the “sponsorship intrudes on every moment of the sponsored event. The product logo is visually merged with the event”. This background signage seen in every red carpet celebrity interview on *The Black Carpet* contains at least one - usually more - brand logo duplicated hundreds of times, thus symbolically associating the celebrity and the brand. These red carpet event sponsors are most benefited when top-tier celebrities are interviewed on the runway, for these shots are often played and then replayed numerous times. Take the July 31, 2008 episode as an example. Prior to each commercial break was a cliffhanger, which hinted at a rumor about Kanye West and consisted of two edited red carpet interviews with West in front of back signage with the brands GQ, Bacardi, *In Touch Weekly*, H&M and BAPE. In addition to this clip running prior to each commercial break it is also used in the gossip segment (which it had been leading the viewer to) toward the end of the episode (28:00). Thanks to Kanye West’s great commercial appeal the signage sponsor garners more impressions than it would have received with a lower-profile celebrity.
Ultimately, these logos and their respective brands work off of a referent system - where “by symbolically placing the product with the object or some other icon representing the object or value…, advertisers hope that, through association, the audience will link the qualities of the object/value with the product” (McAllister, 1996, p. 53). In this case, the logos for GQ (the product) and the other sponsors share visual space with Kanye West (the icon) whose social image is considered trendy, glamorous, confident and innovative (the referents). For such a referent system to be ideologically successful the GQ logo placement must act as an enthymeme - or create an implied connection between the symbols (McAllister, p. 54). Hence, their strategic logo placement helps to symbolically construct GQ to also be trendy, glamorous, confident and innovative.

An analysis of another Black Carpet episode (July 17, 2008) revealed that based on red carpet interviews alone, viewers are exposed to about 75 brand logo impressions. Keep in mind this number excludes commercial break advertisements, clothing credits, non-red carpet
impressions, sponsored segments, bugs, reviews, etc. While most cable programs usually run 22 minutes, dividing the 30-minute program into 73% content and 27% commercials, *The Black Carpet* runs for just 18 minutes, resulting in a 30-minute program that is 60% content and 40% commercial advertisements. The remaining 12 minutes of the episode are comprised of 31 commercial spots. These numbers offer proof that media content is clearly impacted by an advertising-supported media system and a culture saturated in consumption.

In this example of commodity flow shown in Table 5-1 we see how the theme of consumption is inevitably intrusive. Viewers are given an endless stream of messages and reminders that we live in a material society. Because it is actually promoted within the program instead of during the often ignored commercial breaks, a brand does not have to worry about losing viewers – or the audience it is paying for. This analysis offers proof that any fear of – or attempts to avoid – commercials is irrelevant, for the show is a commercial in itself.

Table 5-1. Commodity flow: Commodities and brands mentioned or shown on the 7/24/08 episode of *The Black Carpet* (in order of first appearance).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promotion type</th>
<th>Brand/Commodity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product image</td>
<td>Ducati</td>
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<tr>
<td>Logo</td>
<td>Virgin Mega Store</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logo, on location</td>
<td>ESPY Awards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logo, on location</td>
<td>Staples Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bug</td>
<td>Mountain Dew Dewmocracy debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mention</td>
<td>New York Giants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR</td>
<td>Emmy Awards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
| PR | ABC Television network |
| PR | *ABC World Premiere Movie Event: A Raisin in the Sun* (Sony Pictures Television) |
| PR | *Ugly Betty* (Disney) |
| PR | *Grey’s Anatomy* (Disney) |
| PR | *Grey’s Anatomy Season 2 DVD* (Disney) |
| PR | Billionaire Boys Club |
| PR | Democratic National Convention |
| PR | Vaseline’s *Skin Stories* Documentary |
| PR | Chris Rock’s *Kill the Messenger* on HBO |
| PR | *The Dark Knight* (Warner Bros. Studios) |
| Mention | Santogold |
| Mention | Jazmine Sullivan |
| Back signage | A Bathing Ape (BAPE) |
| Commercial 1 | BET’s *Hell Date & Baldwin Hills* |
| Commercial 2 | *The Steve Harvey Show* on BET |
| Commercial 3 | Progressive auto insurance |
| Commercial 4 | Rhapsody MP3 store |
| Commercial 5 | Tempur-Pedic mattress |
| Commercial 6 | Verizon LG Dare |

(table continues)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Type</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>On location</td>
<td><em>Hurricane Season</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press junket</td>
<td><em>Meet Dave</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bug</td>
<td><em>Baldwin Hills Season 1 DVD release</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mention</td>
<td><em>Cadillac Records</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion &amp; image</td>
<td><em>Stomp the Yard</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back signage</td>
<td>Vitamin Water</td>
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<tr>
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Network Promotions and Brand Identity

So far we have looked at promotional content in the actual programs. The next implication of commodity flow is how BET uses network promotions to define itself as a brand. As with most networks, BET promotes its own programs heavily and through its promotions defines its image to its viewers using strategically framed show promotions, camouflaged promos (McAllister, 1996), interwoven licensed content and defining the “Black” in entertainment.

As stated in chapter four, Baldwin Hills may have started with the intention of normalizing a Black bourgeoisie, but the economic inequality entrenched in every level of African American society could not be made invisible. However, the show’s many dominant narratives that arise due to such realities are avoided in its ads, which instead strategically frame the show in a different light. In the promotions Baldwin Hills is presented as being a superficial glance at life with rich, Black L.A. teens and their adventures in dating, girl-fights and partying. For example, one promotional spot, which is a joint promo for Baldwin Hills and Hell Date (a BET reality dating game show) highlights the high school dramatics between girls - clips of
Gerren appearing as the flirtatious party girl and Lo’Rena who is shown venting her dislike of Gerren. The voiceover asks, “What do you get when you mix girls gone grown…with a little devil?” (Hell Date features a little person dressed as a devil). It cuts to sound bites of Lo’Rena saying, “First thought. Kill her. Second thought. How am I going to get away with it?” The remainder of the commercial interweaves clips of the Baldwin Hills girls showing their aggressions with various silly antics from Hell Date, concluding with Lo’Rena angrily telling a friend, “I’m going to take her out”. Nothing is mentioned about the most constant narrative throughout the season - the impact of socioeconomics in all of their lives. Hence, the promotion paints Baldwin Hills as critically empty despite the cultural value it may offer.

Baldwin Hills was also misrepresented through camouflaged promos and advertisements. During some of its episodes a promotional campaign urging viewers to log onto BET.com and vote for their favorite cast member aired in the first commercial slot of breaks one and two (August 12, 2008). As “candidates” each of the cast members makes an appeal to viewers for their votes. One’s participation in BET.com’s democratic battle automatically enters them for the chance to win $1,000 so they can “roll in the dough like the Baldwin Hills crew” (9:00). By incorporating the program’s characters into an ad for the website the BET enterprise maintains a flow from one BET medium to another. These camouflaged promotions also embellish the superficial sides of Baldwin Hills and possibly restrict the potential for viewers’ own interpretations of the show. As mentioned in the last chapter, these types of constructions stereotype Baldwin Hills as being just about rich, materialistic Black teenagers living in L.A., but in fact this is quite contradictory to some of the season’s dominant narrative themes.

To capitalize on 2008’s political climate, Mountain Dew partnered with BET for their "Dewmocracy" campaign that consisted of a primetime infomercial - a camouflaged ad that tries to deceive “us into thinking that the commercial is not a commercial but rather a talk show, newscast...sitcom” or other popular content form (McAllister, 1996, p. 125). The campaign,
which allowed consumers to vote online and "democratically" elect Mountain Dew’s newest flavor was heavily promoted on BET with conventional advertisements as well as the Dewmocracy Debates, the 30-minute paid program airing during prime-time on July 24, 2008 right after Black Carpet. During that night’s episode of Black Carpet, Dewmocracy Debates was pushed abundantly in the form of two promotional bugs (2:14; 21:04) and a commercial (23:15).

Both the Baldwin Hills “Roll in the dough” and Mountain Dew Dewmocracy campaigns commercialize democracy by attaching it to the consumer market and therefore the capitalist ideology. The irony of this is it removes the viewer’s liberty to avoid this ideology if they so choose by undemocratically forcing it upon them. These campaigns also trivialize the still very new power of Black America’s democracy. For many reasons the 2008 presidential election placed an unprecedented spotlight on the young racial minority vote - the biggest reason of course being the candidacy of Barack Obama. This is not to say these campaigns made BET viewers take the election less seriously, but it is an interesting message about what is off limits to consumerism; not even the most historic election or even the word “democracy” go unappropriated.

BET as a network maintains its own brand continuity by weaving icons and promotions throughout similar programming blocks. For instance, Baldwin Hills is heavily promoted during episodes of The Black Carpet, a show intended to reach a similar audience demographic.

Continuing with the July 24, 2008 episode, the lead-in spots in the first two commercial blocks were for Baldwin Hills. During the episode’s interview with Gabrielle Union, a bug for the soon to be released Baldwin Hills season one DVD appears in the bottom left corner of the screen (10:45). It remains displayed for just under three seconds before being taken down, but seconds later the same bug reappears in the same spot (10:50).

An analysis of the program and movie promotions also shows how BET uses familiar themes of Black cultural identity to brand itself as authentic. By default, its title as the Black
Entertainment Network implies that its program line-up consists of shows an African American person desires to watch, relates to and enjoys. The network’s original programs - as advertised within the sample - further illustrate what “Black” entertainment supposedly is. This includes *Access Granted*, *Hell Date*, and *Somebodies* - the latter being BET’s first and only scripted show since the channel’s 1979 debut as of 2008 - and of course the three shows in the research sample.

Some of BET’s many syndicated shows advertised within the sample include *Thea* (ABC), *Sanford* (NBC), *A Different World* (NBC), *The Steve Harvey Show* (WB), *Just Jordan* (Nick) and *Romeo!* (Nick). The network also conserves production costs by purchasing the broadcast rights to films with relevance to African American culture and running them as BET’s *Blackbuster Movies*. During the sample period two films, *Tyler Perry’s: Madea’s Family Reunion* (2006) and *The Inkwell* (1994), each had promotions during *The Black Carpet* and *Baldwin Hills*.

If we read the commercials for BET’s program lineup as indicative of Black entertainment ideals, then their public service announcements (PSAs) may also reflect a particular aspect of the culture - as interpreted by BET. Interestingly, two episodes of *The Black Carpet* primarily ran PSAs about getting out the youth vote. At the same time, PSAs on *Baldwin Hills* urged young people to “Rap it up” and get tested for HIV. Altogether these various types of promotions contribute to the BET brand image that consumers are buying into and identifying with Black.

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1 *Baldwin Hills*, 7/15/08, 15:00; *Black Carpet*, 7/17/08, 15:17; *The Boot*, 7/18/08, 14:35.
2 *Baldwin Hills*, 7/15/08, 15:00; *Black Carpet*, 7/17/08, 15:17; *The Boot*, 7/18/08, 14:35.
3 *The Boot*, 7/18/08, 14:07.
4 *The Boot*, 7/18/08, 10:11; *Baldwin Hills*, 7/22/08, 22:17; *The Black Carpet*, 7/24/08, 5:59.
5 *Baldwin Hills*, 7/15/08, 15:30; 7/22/08, 16:18; 7/29/08, 15:11.
6 *Baldwin Hills*, 7/15/08, 15:30; 7/22/08, 16:18; 7/29/08, 15:11.
7 *Baldwin Hills*, 7/22/08, 15:57 & 26:06; *Black Carpet*, 7/24/08, 14:17.
8 *Black Carpet*, 7/17/08, 8:11 & 18:42; 7/31/08, 7:00.
9 7/17/08, 15:47; 7/24/08, 17:57.
10 7/22/08, 16:36; 7/29/08, 15:43.
Constructing Identity Through Consumption and Fetishization in BET Commercials

When a company promotes or advertises on BET, it automatically links its brand to Black culture and identity. It implies by its presence on the network that “we (the makers of this product) know Black people”. Commercials on BET suggest an understanding of “us” - us being the Black viewers in partnership with the particular brand. Common or familiar aspects of Black culture are shown associated with the commodity. Some ads explicitly present this. For instance, the July 18, 2008 episode of The Boot includes an unusually long two minute commercial for Voices: The Ultimate Gospel Choir Collection (23:50). By featuring clips from various mass choir performances the ad sells the African American cultural emblem of gospel music, which has heavy roots in the culture’s history. “There is a joyful sound. It’s a powerful sound. It’s the sound of the gospel choir.” The voice-over informs us that Time Life’s double-disc collection is made up of gospel choir “classics”, implying the songs are recognizable and familiar to the audience. The viewer can, therefore, purchase a piece of their own heritage and Black identity by buying Voices: The Ultimate Gospel Choir Collection.

One ad for Cover Girl cosmetics takes the implication of a cultural connection a step further (Black Carpet, July 24, 2008). The first two-thirds of the commercial features Queen Latifah endorsing Volume Exact - the brand’s new mascara line. However, in an added buffer Latifah declares, “And you want my Cover Girl Queen Collection. It’s got our shades, our beauty, and our style in a makeup line I helped design.” Hence, a message for viewers to take away is essentially ‘Cover Girl really gets us’.

Queen Latifah is plus-sized, slightly gender neutral and has shown publicly her ethnocentrism (especially in her early years as a rapper). Many African American women consider these qualities representative of a ‘real Black woman’ in contrast to the slim-figured, conventionally feminine gendered, ethnically-neutral stars like Halle Berry, who may be read as
Eurocentric. Therefore, in this commercial, Latifah stands as a referent system for ‘Black women’ or better yet ‘real Black women’. In her narration, the frequent third person use of "our" implicates an association between Queen Latifah and the BET viewer. Together, Latifah’s image plus the referent script writing distinguish Cover Girl from the other mainstream makeup brands, which are often perceived as White companies that may add a couple of darker shades to the makeup intended for White women, and are clearly detached from the non-White consumer. Her emphasis that, “It’s got our shades, our beauty, and our style in a makeup line I helped design” also implies we - the Black female viewers - can trust the cultural authenticity of this particular product line because its design was overseen by one of us, our own - a fellow ‘real Black woman’.

A McDonald’s Big Mac commercial tries to capture an essence of hip hop with their commercial about DJing and sampling (Black Carpet, July 24, 2008; 23:17). By incorporating an abundance of hip hop signifiers combined with strategic mise en scène and branding tactics, McDonald’s links itself with some of the central components of rap music and its culture. Hip hop is reflected throughout the commercial. The ad begins with a young Black man carrying a McDonald’s bag in one hand and a vinyl record in the other, entering an urban loft full of young adults. The commercial’s soundtrack is a hip hop rendition of the classic Big Mac jingle complete with scratching and heavy beats. At the center of the room are several male DJs - Black and Latino - scratching over turn tables. In the background is a large bookshelf holding a large record collection. One DJ is dressed in a backwards hat, oversized shirt, a large diamond ring and diamond stud earrings. Several shots capturing the scratching show the records on the turn table containing large McDonald’s labels in the middle. The symbolic linkage between the brand and hip hop is further emphasized by a shot of the Big Mac and french fries meal strategically displayed in the foreground and the DJs enthusiastically spinning in the background. Finally, one man decides to eat the burger without his friend’s permission, prompting the consumer to reply,
“Yo! That’s my Big Mac!” As he savors the burger the mooching friend replies, “Hey, I’m just sampling!” In this commercial, McDonald’s eases its products into the culturally rich atmosphere, implying the brand and hip hop culture fit together naturally.

Of course, McDonald’s “Sampling” commercial brings into question several other issues. One is the issue of sampling itself, which remains a major issue in the music industry - and is especially challenging to hip hop as a culture for it is rooted in music. In this commercial, "sampling" is equated with a justification for stealing (albeit humorously). Another issue is the ethical implications of McDonald’s employing obvious cultural references to mass market Big Mac Extra Value Meals to the Black audience despite the growing epidemics of obesity and diabetes within the African American community.

While two of the three programs in the sample regularly depict - and normalize - upper class lifestyles of conspicuous consumption and (presumed) economic stability, the commercials aired during these programs paint a different picture of the audience’s actual consumer identities. By piecing together the shows’ commercials a contextualized draft of each program’s audience research takes shape and offers a more revealing view of the audience’s consumer lifestyles. Even though Baldwin Hills was created to spotlight wealth, its commercials suggest that in reality most of the show’s viewers are not rich and perhaps even have financial problems. One episode (July 29, 2008) advertises several discount retailers or products, such as Payless (13:26), Target (24:07), E-Surance online discount auto insurance (25:37) and Hamburger Helper (13:40), just to name a few. The same episode also showed quite a few commercials for affordable fast food and casual dining restaurants, like Burger King (12:56) and Dave & Buster’s Restaurant (24:38). There is a special appeal to college students with Dell’s Premium XPS computer for under $1,000 (12:11) and a Best Buy commercial depicting a young woman whose parents buy her a computer for college (11:11). The compact car Saturn Outlook is spotlighted for its great mileage (23:36) - an issue many financially conscious Americans are noting. One of the final commercials during
the episode is a Western Union ad showing a father wiring his young adult son money (26:36). Hence, the commercial lineup for Baldwin Hills alludes to a primary audience made up of teens and young adults from middle and lower class backgrounds that have not yet generated their own wealth. They are also likely either pre-, post-, or in the midst of the college track. In general, these ads suggest that every aspect of the average Baldwin Hills viewers’ lives are restrained by limited budgets.

Another trend appears as commercials valorize and encourage consumption by associating commodities with idealized Black lifestyles and identity. Often times, commodities are advertised as having the ability to transform and better one’s life by symbolically illustrating love, happiness, beauty and wealth in relation to the product in the commercial. A Tempur-Pedic mattress commercial airing during The Black Carpet highlights the same upper class lifestyle being exhibited in the show. First, the ad opens with shots of people enjoying a tranquil spa resort-like setting, with women meditating in nature’s locales paired with an ambient soundtrack. “Imagine a place of healing. Where the pain that comes along with how we live just goes away. And what if you could go there tonight and every night? Welcome to Tempur-Pedic.” By purchasing a Tempur-Pedic you are bringing that spa resort lifestyle into your bedroom. The narration builds on an existing implication that the viewer is entitled to luxury. According to the voiceover, Tempur-Pedic does not “simply bring you a bed to sleep on - we believe a bed should do more”; in other words, fulfilling your fundamental needs is not enough. The camera tracks into a contemporary style bedroom with large picturesque windows, golden luxury linens and rich decor that resembles the spa-like images seen at the beginning.

Until now, the actors in the ad have all been White, but the text soon ties this commodity to leisure class African Americans. The camera pans across the luxurious bedroom showing what appears to be a very happily married Black couple enjoying their day being playfully romantic laying on their Tempur-Pedic mattress. Another shot gives a close-up of the man’s wedding ring
as he looks attentively at his wife and runs his fingers through her hair. We also see a close shot of their feet peeking out from under the high-end bed sheets as they play a romantic game of footsie. Throughout the commercial the Black husband and wife appear extremely happy - relaxing in the daytime, smiling, conversing and flirting in their lavish home. Combined with the ethereal music and soothing narration, the Idealism of a happy Black upper-class lifestyle is heightened and it appears naturally attainable. Thanks to the couple’s upper-class membership and the products their wealth buys for them, the viewer is presented a message linking Blackness, wealth, lifestyle, consumption and Tempur-Pedic with happiness.

Conclusion

There are several concurrent discourses apparent in the sample of commercial material that are contradictory, distinctive and altogether complicated. The first - and most obvious - is the incessant advertising, which overwhelms the mind with the doctrine of consumption. Yet, this research demonstrates that consumption goes beyond the act of purchasing or simply being materialistic. The hegemonic power of consumer culture allows it to inundate every aspect of American life, and therefore shape our lives based on the market. The commercials from this BET sample prescribe the highest bidder’s product for every life circumstance we may face and offer unsolicited input on: which bed you should sleep on, what to wear to work, where you should work, personal transportation, your diet and nutrition, how you will communicate with colleagues and loved ones, parenting, and the list goes on. Regardless of our actual needs, an advertising-based media system allows corporations into viewers’ living rooms to sell these commodities ranging from mattresses to birth control. Our lives are deeply enmeshed with the theme of consumption, and therefore so are our identities.
It may be argued that people do not consume Black Entertainment Television for only culturally specific things; what they are really buying is access to an atmosphere of Blackness. The majority of companies and brands promoted in the BET sample could be categorized as White-owned and mainstream, or in other words not particular to African American culture in general. But by being aired within the overarching frame of Black Entertainment Television these brands acquire some of this symbolic capital.
Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

This final chapter will review and discuss some of the main findings and issues of this thesis. It will first summarize these findings by offering answers to the research questions based on the analyses conducted in chapters four and five. Next, the chapter suggests possibilities for future research as well as implications of the study. Finally, it addresses the project’s limitations and concludes with some final thoughts on the subject.

Research Questions

RQ 1. What are the different ways that identity is constructed through consumption and commodity fetishism on BET?

The programs, promotions and commercials all link Black identity with consumption and commodity fetishism. On the network as a whole, Black entertainment is presented as naturally tied to mass consumerism and commercialism, even though of course, through various textual characteristics, this linkage is symbolically constructed. In accepting BET’s vision of the Black community, it becomes difficult to see that cultural expression and even entertainment can actually exist separate from the market and consumer brands. However, on BET if you want to see performances of cultural expression then you have no choice but to accept capitalist ideology as an earmark. This naturalization is found in many examples reviewed previously: movies hyped on Black Carpet as sponsored icons are featured in the background for other products; the utility
of gendered self-branding on *The Boot*; displays of upper-class lifestyles on *Baldwin Hills*; and the casual use of Black icons in promotions and commercials.

More specifically, one way this linkage between identity and consumption occurs is from companies hailing African Americans in commercials as not just a subordinate group to the larger White consumer market, but as distinct and valuable. These companies try to link their commodities to components of Black culture, like Black womanhood and hip hop DJs on turntables. As a result, these brands like Cover Girl and McDonald’s do not just air mainstream commercials on the Black entertainment channel, each creates ads that contain references to this particular audience’s culture. The message this referent system sends is that the particular brand is equally Black and not just White, and it is okay - and even cool - for Black people to use this brand without being labeled as sellouts.

This referent system also attaches certain mystical qualities valued in Black culture to the commodity being advertised. There is no tangible component of “Blackness” contained within McDonald’s Big Mac Extra Value Meal that a person may purchase. And the Cover Girl Queen line may offer darker makeup, but aside from its chemically darkened hue it contains nothing that makes it culturally substantial to African Americans. Black cultural identity - or certain experiences many Blacks culturally identify with – is the intangible component that is really being sold here. The social relations generated by our desires and needs for cultural identity are what determine the commodities’ social values. Therefore, on BET implications of authentic and culturally exclusive Blackness carry the greatest social value and are often fetishized in advertisements for everyday, high-frequency purchases, especially with women’s skin and hair care items.

On the other hand, in many cases Whiteness is frequently used as a signifier for success, social mobility and social acceptance and as a result carries great social value. While *The Black Carpet* carries the Black signifier in its title the show is actually constructed around Whiteness. In
an assimilative fashion, *The Black Carpet* privileges Western standards of society and culture derived from European imperialism. *Black Carpet* deliberately presents itself as clearly accepted into the social elite by touting privileged lifestyles in accordance with these Western standards – showcasing markers of high fashion and conspicuous consumption, like Gucci and Emporio Armani (July 17, 2008), social elitism and philanthropy, like Russell Simmons’ red carpet fundraiser held at his East Hampton estate (July 31, 2008), etc. Because Blackness has always been barred from Western hegemony, BET uses *The Black Carpet* to wedge itself and Blackness in there. As a result, Blackness is used as a marker of authenticity and Whiteness as a marker for social mobility.

The program veils its assimilative nature by an exaggerated celebration of famous African Americans. *The Black Carpet* has found a formula that successfully balances a dichotomy that is perhaps (consciously or subconsciously) inherent in every social hierarchy - wanting to fit in, but not wanting to be seen as a sellout. As a subsidiary of Viacom, BET sits in a unique position within the culture industry. BET is proclaiming itself as not only the dominant source for Black entertainment, but as an elite organization that offers Black entertainment.

Identity is also constructed through the collision of race, gender and commodification. By applying the theoretical framework we can see the sexualization of racial gender identity as constructed within a context of consumption and commodity fetishism (Butler, 2007). If we take Butler’s (p. xxiii) statement that “within commodity culture… ‘subversion’ carries market value” and combine it with this chapter’s argument of *The Boot* as a metaphorical marketplace, we can conclude that contestants on *The Boot* are packaging and marketing their subversive qualities of womanhood to sell themselves as commodities. This setup presents sexual identity as an essence that is detached from our natural selves - as a tool women pull out and use to rope a partner and relationship - the tool of performativity. Ultimately, by commodifying the Black woman into a product with a use-value the performativity of (raced) sexuality and gender is fetishized, or
concealed. For one contestant, her lips are provocatively discussed and visually enhanced, essentializing the contestant with a particular physical characteristic that has both a sexist (the sexualized orifice) and racist (the large-lipped Black) legacy.

Through this show we find that Black gender identity actually is the performativity of hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality - which creates an interesting "metalepsis," which according to Butler (p. xv) is "the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself". The role of Blackness in this metaphorical marketplace takes shape in two ways: first through the guys’ rejections of what they read as deliberate Whiteness, i.e. spoiled-ness, aversion to cooking, snitching, etc., and second through their approval of Whiteness when it takes the form of gendered submissiveness (despite this being a product of White patriarchy). In the case of The Boot, these messages are also reinforced by the audio-visual supertext, which is often used to tell audiences "the truth" about contestants.

Another way identity is influenced is in the message conveyed that desirable or acceptable career options for African Americans are limited. There are hardly any mentions about jobs with working class salaries and these are often lambasted for the financial restrictions they place on one’s potential consumption capacity. We saw this in Baldwin Hills, which emphasizes music, fashion and sports as the legitimate (if still simultaneously unattainable) career domains of college-bound Black youth. Reinforcing these career boundaries, Ashley’s close family friend actress Vivica Fox actually discourages her from going into the law field. It is clear that Fox is either unaware of, or chooses not to consider the significant need for more racial and gender minorities in the field of law. Because the American legal system is still very White and very patriarchal these marginalized groups do go misunderstood and as a result misrepresented due to various cultural barriers. Many people of various races are aware of the major role law plays in perpetuating contemporary racism (a subject which is too large to broach here). However, if this TV show and comments like those from Vivica Fox can be considered even just snapshots of the
Black diasporic mindset, it seems that the desire to indulge in consumerism is frequently prioritized over penetrating the hegemonic structure.

**RQ 2. What commonalities and differences of consumption identity exist between the different textual categories (programs, commercials, program promotions) on BET?**

As noted above, in many ways the messages about Black consumption are consistent across the BET network. We see product images and consumer lifestyles throughout programs, a flow of commodities woven throughout multiple textual forms, and continued messages about the overall importance of consumption.

But there are several notable differences between the discourses. First, each of the three programs offers a distinct version of the consumption-identity linkage. *The Black Carpet* tries to engender an ideology of African American social elitism, *The Boot* creates a metaphorical marketplace by branding and commodifying the female participants, and *Baldwin Hills* attempts to debunk stereotypes about Blacks and poverty by focusing on wealthy teenagers.

Another difference found in the textual categories is that consumer discourses between programs and commercials are often contradictory. At times they appear so divergent that it is as if they are speaking to two separate audiences from separate economic classes. Throughout *The Black Carpet* elite and upper-middle class brands like Louis Vuitton and Macy’s are name dropped incessantly. However, each time the program pauses and a commercial break begins, it is as if the audience is told to go back to their side of the tracks, running ads from Western Union and JCPenney. Hence, the show consists of one discourse in which viewers are sold a taste of the cultural capital that many are curious about, and another discourse that speaks to poor, lower and middle class realities that the viewers are more likely able to participate in. It may be inferred that the hegemonic characteristics manifest differently with the various texts on BET, a company created by, staffed by and viewed by African Americans than it does in the commercial advertising system.
RQ 3. Are there counter-hegemonic representations of consumption and identity in the sample and, if so, what form do they take?

This thesis argues that many of the commodity-oriented discourses on BET are hegemonic. However, this is not monolithic. Some commercial forms did offer celebrations of Black culture that were so divergent from other televised contexts that they might be viewed as offering alternative meanings. This is evidenced with the advertisement for *Voices: The Ultimate Gospel Choir Collection*. Generally speaking, the Black gospel choir is culturally specific and would not be common on a mainstream network due to the risk of alienating the non-Black viewers; in this way it is counter to many of the commodity images on BET which seem to subordinate Black identity to the commodity function. However, *Voices* airs within a status quo-friendly commercial lineup and therefore a lot of its counter-hegemonic potential may be blunted.

Also noted in chapter four was the potential counter-hegemony of *Baldwin Hills*, which did offer discussions of the economic struggles of lower and middle-class Black youth. These included reflections on the realities of paying for college, living expenses and the disconnect between career aspirations and economic resources. Such discussions, though, also occurred in the context of other characters that maneuvered in upper-class lifestyles and leisure activities, a theme which the promotions for the program emphasized. Therefore, like the gospel choir commercial, its counter-hegemonic potential may also be blunted.

RQ 4. Given the socioeconomic realities, what might we conclude about Black identity and consumption on BET?

Based on chapters four and five we can conclude that BET’s representations of African American identity commonly offer consumption as a way to achieve socio-economic success; it then glorifies this success by revering lavish lifestyles. In spite of this, programs still seem to be greatly influenced by the current socioeconomic circumstances surrounding the race. Even when the programs tried to focus on lifestyles of wealth, the financial realities of their Black audience
interfered. For example, while *The Black Carpet* aimed to equate itself with high end fashion, it also had to address the reality that this risked possibly alienating their audience. As a result, the program sometimes incorporated material that acknowledged the (many) viewers who may be financially limited, like in the episode covering the unveiling of Fabulosity, Kimora Lee Simmons’, budget friendly clothing line (August 14).

On *Baldwin Hills*, as mentioned above, Staci’s economic plight became a main storyline. Throughout the season - while her peers are shown enjoying spa treatments and fashion shows - Staci is searching relentlessly for a job to avoid having to drop out of college. In terms of commercials, ads for fast-food and money loan companies also hint at some economic realities. So we see on BET an attempt to appeal to upper crust ideals and consumption practices, but also some manifestations of the economic crisis. The content is inevitably restricted by the sociohistorical legacies attached to the race. In other words, Black socioeconomic instability is mildly reflected in the African American consumer identity on BET network.

**Future Research & Implications**

This study could be enhanced by using alternative methodologies. For example, although this study applied a qualitative textual analysis, conducting a quantitative content analysis on a broader sample of the economic levels of consumption discourses, such as the degree and kind of commodities advertised, may indicate the different targeted viewers with poor, working, middle, and upper class incomes. Additionally, it could analyze other variables in which different brands are presented. What are the percentages of White and Black characters in the commercials, and are these associated with particular products on BET? How do these correlate with the various product categories, categories that may also be coded by class?
Another future expansion on this project may add research methods that incorporate the voices of viewers. I think the best format for this would be to use focus groups made up of Blacks with a great variety of identity factors like different childhood and present socioeconomic conditions, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, education level, geographic location, etc. Perhaps viewers could relay how often they are aware of messages of consumption to determine how hegemonic these messages are. It could ask, to what extent and in what ways do BET viewers believe that identity is linked to consumption?

Ideally, this thesis could be used as an educational tool to help young people of all groups understand the degree to which BET's messages about identity and consumption may be out of step with socio-economic realities. Specific techniques and characteristics could be integrated into a media literacy curriculum about black images in entertainment and consumption.

The truth is BET’s choice of how to depict Black consumer identity to Black audiences is to a great extent misleading – and at worst dishonest – and demonstrates yet another way that capitalism indirectly bruises the African American people. A study like this thesis could ideally incite viewers to challenge BET and hold the network – which because of its name is influential to the identities of many people – to a higher standard. African Americans can and should demand better, and more importantly considering the support they have provided BET since its inception 30 years ago, they deserve better.

Limitations and Reflections

The scope of this topic could easily span a dissertation or even a book, and had to be greatly condensed for a master’s thesis. This study is limited by its small sample of only three original reality programs on BET. That being said, while these shows may be reflections of the network, a larger sample may have illustrated additional textual characteristics and nuanced
differences. With the sample spanning one month the results only offer a snapshot of BET in one period of its existence.

It goes without saying that any study seeking to reveal the circumstances of a large cultural group will be over-generalizing and limited. Not all Black Americans watch BET or subscribe to the hip hop and new upper class cultures that the channel promotes. Contemporary Black popular culture is highly contested and is a great point of tension in the African American community. By analyzing strictly the texts the important aspect of how exactly viewers receive these messages of consumption is eliminated. My interpretations are made through the realm of academia and a standpoint of one form of post-civil rights privilege. As a result, in this research there is a disconnect from the most oppressed voices it speaks about - those of the poor and working classes.

One thing I feared in writing this thesis was possibly presenting African Americans as doomed to the fate of the past, naive or void of any agency in their own lives, because this would be terribly incorrect. As a member of the Black Diaspora, I myself am evidence of the intelligence, strength and resilience within this race that were necessary tools for them to break free from hundreds of years of oppressive domination. As a child my mother was one of many that endured the traumatic experience of desegregation in the south – being forced to ride a bus to the side of town where they knew they were more than unwanted and could be targeted for cruel and even violent racism. These children were pioneers in their own right, carrying some of society’s heaviest burdens. The mere presence of their raced bodies brought into the classrooms a history that many Americans did not want to confront. However, my mother tells me of how much worse it must have been for her grandparents who had almost no possessions of their own, but proudly found a way out of Alabama’s indentured farming system. She also says how she will never forget her grandmother’s desire for her to have better, telling her to never let her hands become rough, callused and worn as hers had. My mother’s working class parents proudly put her
through school, making her the first college graduate in the family, which she even capped with a master’s degree. I use this anecdote to reiterate that this race has always been persecuted by capitalism and society, but it is not doomed.

Robert Johnson deserves a great deal of credit for his unprecedented accomplishment of creating a mass communication medium for a minority group. However, capitalism has clouded the path of his channel’s potential. Surely, BET can entertain us with material that does not fetishize the race, or misrepresent our economic advancements so much that the progress that actually has been made pales in comparison. The social, economic and political conditions of Black America have come so far, and BET should proudly exhibit this in an authentic sociohistorical context.

This thesis aims to remind us that it is illogical to expect a few recent decades of advancement to fully reverse the shameful ideologies that have become engrained in American culture over the span of many centuries. A great proportion of BET’s programming almost denies the reality that as of now, stark socioeconomic differences continue to exist between groups. Sadly, this denial just normalizes an unrepresentative picture of Black America to Black America – as well as to the rest of the world. Since 1979 Black Entertainment Television has increasingly grown into one of the many tools of consumer culture that helps encourage and facilitate the debt that traps so much of the Black Diaspora’s potential. However, it is not too late for the network to make a change and perhaps flourish into a tool of empowerment for all of Black America in the world of 21st century capitalism.
References


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