

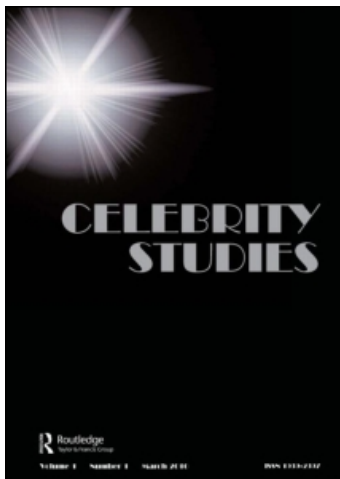
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Buying Beyoncé

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The image of old racial order has been vitiated by the rise of a new variety of African American celebrities: acquisitive, ambitious, flamboyantly successful and individualistic; the kind of people who are interested in channelling their energies into their own careers, rather into indeterminate causes such as racism. In Beyoncé, the United States – and perhaps the world – has a symbol of glamour and unrestrained consumption that offers, if not a solution, then an apparent salve to the enduring effects of racism. The argument advanced here is that Beyoncé, singer, actor, entrepreneur, serial endorser and all-purpose celebrity, has risen in a post-9/11 era when race and racism were unwanted shibboleths and a new racial order was in construction. Early symbols of the new order were Bill Cosby and Oprah Winfrey. Beyoncé, like Tiger Woods, Halle Berry and other African American A-list members, are its current representatives. Beyoncé embodies a narrative, a living description of a culture in which race is a remnant of history and limitless consumer choice has become a substitute for equality. The analysis moves to an examination of how Beyoncé emerged and developed into a recognisable brand, her principal marketing alter ego being ‘Sasha Fierce’. The multiple products bearing her imprimatur and the revenue they generate suggest comparisons with a medium-size industry. Yet the most valuable product Beyoncé sells is a particular conception of America – as a nation where history has been, if not banished, rendered insignificant. Her ability to do so is predicated on her ethnic ambiguity: she claims to be ‘universal’, yet slides comfortably into a familiar discourse of exoticism essayed by earlier black female performers. A refusal to conform to existing categories combined with an insistence on the primacy of the market makes Beyoncé an exquisite commodity in a celebrity-fixated consumer culture although an unreliable indicator of black America. The evidence contrasts the image portrayed by Beyoncé with that of other black Americans and concludes with the proposition that the ‘dream’ she purveys has a potent didactic message.

Keywords: African American; Beyoncé; Black culture; Obama era; race; racism; popular music

At last

It could have been preordained; she was, after all, Destiny’s Child. In January 2009, Beyoncé took the stage at the inaugural ‘Neighborhood Ball’ for Barack Obama and serenaded the new US President and his wife: ‘At last, the skies above are blue . . . I found a dream that I could speak to, a dream that I can call my own’, sang the diva, in clear allusion to the historic election of the first African American President (URLs for ‘At last’ and subsequent tracks referenced in the text are listed at the end of the paper).

Ostensibly a love song, from the 1942 film *Orchestra Wives*, ‘At last’ was freighted with symbolic meaning. Etta James, the soul singer whom Beyoncé played in her film

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Cadillac Records (2008), and who recorded the track in 1961, was overlooked, much to her chagrin; but James was emblematic of another age, when blacks in America were denied access to housing in areas designated whites-only, or education in white schools. Segregation was formally terminated by the Civil Rights legislation of 1964 and 1965.

Beyoncé, on the other hand, symbolised an altogether different world, one in which blacks not only shared facilities with whites, but had actually risen to prominence in all areas of society including, as Obama evidenced, the political arena. The atavistic yoke of slavery and racism and stereotypes it entailed had burdened African Americans for decades after the formal confirmation of civil rights. With the arrival of Beyoncé, African Americans, it seemed, finally emerged as warrantable human beings, equals in every sense.

Beyoncé was glamorous, ostentatiously rich, enjoyed a sybaritic lifestyle and had a partner who could lay claim to be the world's most successful rap artist. In almost every way, she was the actualisation of the American Dream so long denied black people. The ideal of equality, of opportunity and of material success that had for long been abstract and unattainable was given human shape. Beyoncé embodied America's new racial order.

Yet contraries thrive in America: if Beyoncé was a representative it was of a celebrity elite, not of the black population, the majority of whom continued to underachieve in education and overachieve in graduating to prisons. Most remained at the opposite end of the social spectrum to Beyoncé and continued to face what Farah Jasmine Griffin calls 'the instability, insecurity, and disruption that . . . have been a persistent part of the black experience' (2009, p. 657).

In most circumstances, 'At last' would have been a sentimental tune and little more. Martin Luther King invoked the phrase from a negro spiritual in his historic 'I have a dream' speech in 1963: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!' (full text available from: <http://www.usconstitution.net/dream.html> accessed 5 February 2010).

Then – a year before the anti-discrimination law – it expressed hope. Sung by Beyoncé as the President and his wife, Michelle, waltzed, it became an ideological validation: 'Life is like a song'. The power of Beyoncé was in her living of the Dream, not just singing about it.

Since 2003, when she released her first solo album *Dangerously in Love*, Beyoncé has risen to the elite of the world's female singers, outselling established artists (120 million CDs sold) and diversifying into film and commercials; she also has multiple fashion lines and endorses more products than any other living person. Her contracts mean she is present in some form or other in practically every department store in the world. As well as CDs, box office tickets and clothes, Beyoncé sells soft drinks, cosmetics, accessories, perfume, children's products and sundry other commodities; but the most valuable commodity she trades in is a singular view of the United States that sells to white Middle America and at least part of black America.

It is a view of a society that has solved what was once called the American dilemma – a land of opportunity in which a racial divisions were the most prominent feature of the landscape. America has struggled, often vainly, to deal with its most bedevilling problem, although since the 1980s and the advent of celebrity culture a solution of sorts has offered itself. Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan and the plethora of black celebrities collectively presented a new image of talented, determined and noticeably wealthy African Americans who resisted grumbling about racism.

Together, Oprah, Cosby, Jordan and other conspicuously successful yet placatory African Americans provided a kind of evidence that racism, while once a raging lion that needed to be slain, was no longer such a monstrous threat to black people. The metaphor is

Shelby Steele's: in his 1990s book *The Content of Our Character* he argued that racism had diminished to the stature of an annoying insect – which just needed to be swatted. As long as ethnic minorities in general and African Americans in particular continued to labour in the role of perennial victims and squander their energies on fighting the insect-like irritant, they would not 'progress' as individuals, argued Steele.

Like Cosby and, in a more tacit way, other black celebrities of the early 1990s, Steele encouraged ethnic minority people to concentrate on their own development as individuals, rather than sink their energies into the collective effort to destroy a beast that had long since been tamed. Clearly Beyoncé was part of a generation which heeded the advice.

We know that Beyoncé is a prodigious pitchwoman for commodities. Only in America could her ability to sell be confederated to the wider, moral project: to persuade the world that, even if racism is not at end, an end is surely in sight. How? Juliana Mansvelt offers a clue: 'Aesthetics, taste and style cannot be divorced from "political" questions about power, inequality and oppression' (2010, p. 128).

Outsider on the inside

In common with other African American celebrities, Beyoncé has debouched from a confined space and unfolded as a visibly successful black person for whom racism and discrimination have presented neither impediment nor limitation – at least not that she has spoken of. Her considered silence on social or political issues ensures that she avoids controversy and endears herself both to advertisers and a mainstream audience. It also assures her a reputation as a 'safe' figure: unlike some other African American celebrities in recent years, Beyoncé is prudent, unadventurous and not prone to commenting on issues other than her own products or endorsements. 'Race' is not within her range although, presumably emboldened by her associations with Barack and Michelle Obama, she has proposed: 'The perception of an African American has changed' (4Music 2009).

So, Beyoncé is prominent among a leading group of black and ethnic minority celebrities who have – perhaps unwittingly – helped to ease the conscience of Middle America. 'Black liminality' is how Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd captures the quality possessed, she believes, by these figures, who occupy an 'indeterminate space between social positions', and who are 'perceived as acceptable and unacceptable, insider and outsider' (2008, p. 429).

On Alexander-Floyd's account, black celebrities straddle boundaries of insider and outsider. In particular, she identifies the scholar, author and former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as the public figure who most vividly represents 'a version of an idealised racial present and future'. For Alexander-Floyd, Rice portrays a society 'where race and sexism have been practically eradicated' (2008, pp. 428–429).

Beyoncé was to Rice what Aretha Franklin was to Shirley Chisholm (who, in 1968, became the first black woman elected to US Congress): different generations, different cultures, different contexts, but part of the same narrative. I am using 'narrative' to mean an account of connected events that collectively impart a moral story or didactic record; as distinct from, for instance, a dialogue between public figures and their audiences without any kind of message or meaning, or a theme that indicates a subject or thought, but without detailed information.

Neal Gabler uses the concept in offering a way of understanding the spell contemporary celebrities appear to have held over consumers in recent years. They do, 'because they provided narratives for us'.

Take Michael Jackson: his life was a sensational drama, interspersed with exciting and often scandalous events that appealed to emotion as well as intellect. Jackson himself

became an exaggerated figure who metamorphosed in full public view; his erratic behaviour, alleged prescription drug dependencies, encounters with children and other bizarreries both amused and edified his global audience. I use ‘edified’ because there was moral and even intellectual value in following how a precociously gifted black American male pursued courses of action that were disastrously damaging to himself.

Gabler believes that, regardless of how well he or she may sing, dance, act or in some other way engage consumers, a celebrity retains his or her status ‘only so long as he or she is living out an interesting narrative, or at least one the media find interesting . . . the size of the celebrity is in direct proportion to the novelty and excitement of the narrative’. Further: ‘When an individual loses his or her narrative or the narrative becomes attenuated, the celebrity vanishes – the equivalent of a movie or a novel that bores you’ (2009).

The likes of Mike Tyson and O.J. Simpson once thrilled us: Tyson was arrested in 1991 and subsequently convicted for rape; Simpson was arrested in 1994 and featured in arguably the most captivating murder trial of the century. However, while Tyson occasionally appears in movies, both he and Simpson have lost their narrative force in recent years.

Beyoncé’s force, by contrast, has increased. She has not presented us with a drama of multiple identities, reinvention, the merciless pursuit of fame and envy that purports to tell us something significant about modernity and ourselves; Madonna has already done this; nor about the perils of marriage and motherhood, as Britney Spears has portrayed them. Despite emerging at a time when the media is more panoptic than at any time in history, Beyoncé manages to maintain a closely controlled private life: it took an overlong six months before the media discovered she had married in 2008, for example.

Beyoncé’s life has lacked both scandal and salacity although, of course, her blandness could quickly change into a different narrative should more prurient elements surface in future (*à la* Tiger Woods), but within the apparent blandness there is a narrative that remains unmatched in its potency and ability to enlighten. Approached in this way, Beyoncé is less a human being, more an ambulant brand, an advertisement for a new gilded age when commodities overpower everything – including race – and in which some black people are able to exercise a right that is afforded almost sacramental status in modern culture: to make consumer choices.

One of the effects of the Beyoncé brand – the physical appearance, and name associated with the abundant products she dispenses or endorses – is to undermine the age-old belief in racism and racist discrimination by reducing hitherto insoluble problems to the dimensions of the market.

In the Beyoncé narrative, racism is merely a vestige of a bygone age when black and other ethnic minorities were outside the consumerist economy. Now, as Beyoncé incessantly reminds anyone who has ever listened to her music, seen her movies or bought an item of the numberless pieces of merchandise that bear her imprimatur – and that probably means all of us – black people are on the inside.

When Jonathan Bignell observes: ‘In a commodity culture people become understood as things, and things are given life’, he might have had Beyoncé in mind. (2005, p. 158). Not only does she personify youth and beauty, glamour and affluence, luxury and money: Beyoncé turns them and, in the process, herself, into items of trade that confer some of her status onto consumers. Popular icons such as Beyoncé ‘are appropriated by fans as meaningful resources in their everyday lives’, according to Cornell Sandvoss (2005, p. 13).

Sandvoss’ work proffers an understanding of the relationship fans have with the objects of their adulation or even just admiration. He reveals: ‘The relationship between fans and their object of fandom goes beyond mere identification’ (2005, p. 102).

On this account, the emotional relationship often dismissed as marketing verbiage is actually the crucial nexus that helps explain why most of us are awed – and I mean impressed rather than frightened – by celebrities. It is because they have become resources when we think about ourselves, position ourselves and reflect upon how we would like others to see us. The seemingly mundane act of shopping actually involves us in ‘actively shaping a sense of self’ as well as acquiring possessions.

How does this work? Sharon Boden’s answer is simple, but instructive; her study concludes: ‘Consumption . . . helps to humanize and make intimate the bond between child and celebrity, regardless of age, time and place’ (2006, p. 297).

Boden is writing about ‘tweenagers’ (7–11-year-olds), but the implications of her research are reverberant. Buying products is not just an exchange of money-for-goods: it is a transaction, in which consumers both exercise an entitlement and submit themselves. Juliana Mansvelt goes even further: ‘Consumption is “as much an act of imagination” as it is the using up of things’ (2010, p. 8).

Commodities carry with them use value, exchange value and ideational value. The imaginative power conferred by consumer products has brought with it an unlikely trade-off. Entertainment, commodities and consumer choice have become makeweights for genuine ethnic equality. Perhaps Beyoncé does not signal the end of racism; but she is a sign that an end is in sight. This has led to the intoxicating prospect that what Gunnar Myrdal in 1944 called *An American Dilemma* is finally approaching a resolution: an indifference to race.

Beyoncé is at the centre of an immaculately ordered industry in which ethnic divisions mean nothing and racism is imperceptible. The motive power behind her propulsion from child protégé to one of the world’s most celebrated and perfect brands is the market. It is her source of motive power: the market initiates events, influences people and overwhelms all other considerations.

Listen to the brand

Beyoncé Knowles grew up in a four-bedroomed home in an affluent area of Houston, Texas. Her father, Matthew, worked in sales at Xerox; her mother, Tina, owned a hair-dressing salon; younger sister Solange is now a singer. By the time she was 10, Beyoncé was in a band, Girl’s Tyme (sometimes spelled Girlz Tyme), which was assembled after a series of auditions in 1990. Girl’s Tyme was one of the countless all-female bands eclipsed by the Spice Girls, whose first single ‘Wannabe’ was released in 1996. Beyoncé was the youngest of the six members, the eldest being 13-year-old Nikki Taylor, although Matthew Knowles managed both his daughter and fellow member Kelly Rowland, then aged 11, suggesting that the band was never simply a bunch of schoolgirls acting on juvenile whims. There was businesslike purpose even in the first venture.

Personnel changes and the death of one band member’s parents left Matthew Knowles in charge of a band with several line-ups and names, including Cliché, Something Fresh and Destiny and the Dolls, eventually becoming, in 1995, Destiny’s Child. Suspecting the band’s potential, Matthew Knowles resigned from Xerox to manage the band full-time.

‘Under his authority the band rehearsed for hours every day, working with a media coach, a choreographer and a voice teacher’, writes Lacey Rose (2009). Even from the outset, Destiny’s Child was an operation – a systematic activity in which business organisation is involved. Beyoncé later reflected that her father had studied the factory-like operations used by Motown.

Matthew Knowles brokered his band’s breakthrough deal with Columbia Records in 1996. The first single ‘Killing time’ was part of the soundtrack for the film *Men in Black*.

Two members of the four-piece band left after objecting to Matthew Knowles' domineering management and were replaced, although Knowles later trimmed the band down to a trio, comprising Beyoncé, Michelle Williams and Kelly Rowland. A dispute over money often prompts the kind of scandal that propels showbusiness careers. So, when the aggrieved pair claimed Matthew Knowles owed them money, they started a legal dispute – eventually settled out of court – that actually helped Destiny Child's record sales. The second album, *The Writing's on the Wall*, sold 8 million copies and the band went on to become the most successful female recording band ever, outselling both the Supremes and TLC.

In 2003, aged 21, Beyoncé released her first solo album, *Dangerously in Love*. It is not unusual for artists to pursue independent projects while remaining part of a band. Michael Jackson famously prosecuted his own career even though he was still integral to the Jackson 5 (later The Jacksons), although the exemplar remains Diana Ross, who emerged from the chrysalis of the Supremes to become the central character in Diana Ross and the Supremes, before finally leaving the band in 1970.

Like Ross, Beyoncé ventured into film, her second appearance timed to coincide with the solo album. Remember, Destiny's Child was already an established act, with 11.7 million albums sold, according to Nielsen SoundScan; but it was impossible to contemplate the band without Beyoncé. At the time of her solo album's release, Josh Tyrangiel wrote of 'the industry perception of Destiny's Child as Beyoncé and two warm bodies in stilettos' (2003).

From the moment her first album earned five Grammy awards, Beyoncé's departure seemed inevitable. The album sold four million copies and counting. She promoted her second album *B'Day*, released in 2006, with a 30-country concert tour. On stage, Beyoncé's caramel skin and straightened blonde hair made her ethnicity ambiguous, although beguilingly so. As *Rolling Stone* columnist Toure put it in 2004: 'Beyoncé has become a crossover sex symbol . . . a black girl who's not so overwhelmingly Nubian that white people don't appreciate her beauty' (4 March) (the term 'crossover' means a black artist who achieves success in the mainstream, rather than exclusively ethnic, market).

The romantic interest in her life centred on Shawn Carter, aka Jay-Z, 10 years her senior, and one of the world's pre-eminent purveyors of rap music, a genre that has its roots deeply in the black culture of the 1990s. Her movements with Jay-Z were well documented by a paparazzi seemingly entranced with celebrity couples: Brangelina, TomKat, Posh & Becks *et al.* Jay-Z was indisputably African American and a globally popular rapper who had, perhaps more than any other artist, domesticated a caustically profane musical form, making it suitable for family consumption. He had also embraced very publicly the American model of success, diversifying into clothes lines (including Rocawear), record labels (holding an interest in Def Jam) and sports clubs (the New Jersey Nets basketball franchise). In 2009 Matthew Miller estimated his personal wealth at \$150 million.

Beyoncé was her beau's equal in business: guided by her father she built, or perhaps became, a multi-purpose industry. A key moment in its construction came in 2004 when Matthew Knowles considered an option offered by Estée Lauder-owned Tommy Hilfiger Toiletries (THT). 'We were trying to decide if she [Beyoncé] would do her own line or a licensing agreement', he told Melinda Newman and Gail Mitchell (2004, p. 72).

In the event, Beyoncé became the spokesperson for THT's 'True Star' fragrance, but Matthew Knowles was evidently exercised by the conundrum. In 2008 he found a third option: fabricate an entirely new figure that functioned as both Beyoncé's alter ego and an autonomous brand replete with its own products. *I am... Sasha Fierce* was Beyoncé's 2008 album and, the following year, she promoted it with a world tour themed as 'I am . . . '.

Several artists over the years have created secondary personalities. David Bowie's 'Ziggy Stardust' in the early 1970s, Madonna's 'Material Girl' in the 1980s and Eminem's 'The real Slim Shady' in the 1990s, for example. 'Sasha Fierce' was something different, however. The market geometry drawn in 2004 by Gwen Stefani was an inspiration. By arranging the release of her album, *Love. Angel. Music. Baby.* (Interscope 2004) to intersect with her L.A.M.B. fashion line, Stefani cross-promoted: each CD sale promoted the clothes and each L.A.M.B. article gave publicity to the album (<http://www.gwenstefani.com/> accessed 5 February 2010).

Exploiting the adolescent market through an artifice is far from original, of course. There are many examples, Beyoncé's closest counterpart being Miley Cyrus, whose persona Hannah Montana served as vehicle for a miscellany of products (<http://www.miley-cyrus.com/> accessed 5 February 2010).

Beyoncé's third solo album and the accompanying tour were like living sales catalogues, introducing consumers to a range of purchasable products: not just any consumers, but a specific demographic: schoolchildren. The Sasha Fierce label was integrated into her own Deréon collection of clothes and accessories and advertised by Beyoncé herself. 'The collection, which is inspired by Beyoncé's stage presence . . . includes a full range of sportswear, outerwear, handbags, footwear, eyewear, lingerie and jewelry', reported Julee Kaplan (2009, p. 3).

Missing no opportunity for cross-promotion, Beyoncé included in her single 'Single ladies (put a ring on it)' the line: 'A man on my hips holds me tighter than my Deréon jeans'.

En passant, research by Kenneth Lord and Sanjay Putrevu suggests the target market for Sasha Fierce is the most susceptible to celebrity endorsements: 'They (pre-college teens) tend not to be aware of or pay little attention to the difference between attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness . . . celebrity endorsers might have an undue influence on such consumers' (2009, p. 11).

Sasha Fierce was Beyoncé's most preposterous yet accomplished industrial innovation yet. It was a smart, perhaps brilliant diversification, like Toyota's introduction of Lexus, a separate marque but one that carried the reputation of the established car manufacturer.

It also earned her cruel smiles as well as plaudits. Barbara Ellen, for example, acknowledged that, while Beyoncé is highly skilled and universally appealing: 'She is so steeped in professionalism that what should be magical can become mechanical' (2009).

If, as Ellen seems to suspect, Beyoncé resembles an industrial product, it is because, by the age of 28, she was at the centre of what was, essentially, an industrial complex. There is also a question implicit in Ellen's remark: do icons grow organically, or can they be mechanically produced? In October 2008, Beyoncé declared in a *Marie Claire* interview: 'I'm over being a pop star . . . I wanna be iconic' (available from: <http://www.marieclaire.co.uk/celebrity/interviews/272366/beyonce-interview.html/> accessed 15 February 2010).

Unbridled consumption

Beyoncé espouses a consumerist morality. In a mostly rhapsodic essay on Beyoncé's 2006 album *B'Day*, released a year after the New Orleans catastrophe, Daphne A. Brooks proposed that Beyoncé deputised or 'surrogated', as she puts it, for the numerous black women displaced and ignored in the Katrina aftermath. Brooks approaches Beyoncé's music as 'a willed response to black women's social dislocation'. Beyoncé 'recycles palpable forms of black female sociopolitical grief and loss as well as spirited dissent and dissonance . . . [and] articulates the questions and concerns of black women' (2008, p. 180).

In her only quibble, Brooks detects that the lyrics of *B'Day* express 'a language of socioeconomic autonomy that is, in every way, troubling in its fixation on materialism' (2008, p. 201). While she does not expand on this, she is presumably referring to the obsessive interest in material possessions that Beyoncé and her retinue are involved in feeding. Beyoncé's *raison d'être*, like that of any other celebrity, is making consumers part with their money by offering them products.

If *raison d'être* – the most important purpose for her existence – seems an overstatement or distortion, consider the full scope of her sales. At a time when record sales have dropped 45% from their peak in 2000, Beyoncé sells 4.5 million CDs, plus 9.5 million downloads every year, in addition to 300,000 digital albums. She also earns royalties from the 9.5 million digital singles as well as 2.6 million ringtones for telephones.

According to *Forbes.com*, Beyoncé makes \$21 million per year from album sales alone. Writing and sometimes producing her own music offers another income stream amounting to \$8 million per year. To date Beyoncé, both solo and with Destiny's Child, has sold 100 million units, including albums, physical and digital singles and music DVDs (Mitchell 2009).

Beyoncé enjoins her fans to buy all manner of commodities, from cosmetics to HDTVs; her formidable portfolio of endorsement contracts with advertisers, such as Giorgio Armani and Vizio, bring her \$20 million per year. With her mother, Beyoncé has launched two designer labels, House of Deréon, which specialises in upmarket clothes, and Deréon, which includes handbags, sportswear and jewellery. The two lines bring in \$15 million per year.

An average price ticket to a Beyoncé concert on her 2010 tour would cost consumers £100, or \$150, although VIP tickets for her Trinidad concert in February 2010 had a face value of \$1600, or £1000. Once in the arena, the fan might be lured by the tee-shirts and posters that are typically on sale; \$14 million of Beyoncé's yearly income is from touring receipts and merchandise. The 'I am . . .' tour was among the top 15 highest-grossing tours in history, according to *Billboard* (<http://www.billboard.com/news/concert-charts-fierce-showing-by-beyonce-1003997011.story#>, accessed 22 March, 2010).

Judging by the amount of money advertisers spend on sponsoring tours, corporations love Beyoncé as much as her fans. Her theatrical stage performances are compelling to consumers, who are exposed to what is effectively a two-hour commercial for the products of the tour sponsors. The food manufacturing giant General Mills is a major sponsor; others include Nintendo, L'Oreal and Trident, bringing her sponsorship total to \$4 million. Thierry Mugler was costume designer for the 'I am . . .' tour although, naturally, Deréon and House of Deréon contributed the wardrobe.

By 2010, Beyoncé had featured in seven acting roles in films such as *Austin Powers in Goldmember*, *Dreamgirls* and *Obsessed*, a film she also executive-produced through her own company, Parkwood Films. She earned \$5 million from movies in 2008. The money is not magicked into being: we, the cinema-going, DVD-procuring, TV subscription-purchasing audience are the sources.

Her total annual income, according to *Forbes.com*, is \$78 million, or £48 million, about the same as the profit of a petrochemical company such as Copesul, and greater than the annual profit of US Airways. In every legitimate sense of the word, Beyoncé is an industry: her commercial activity involves turning raw material into consumable goods. The raw material, in this instance, is her name or sheer presence, not only her music. 'I've worked too hard and sacrificed too much to do something silly that would mess up the brand I've created all of these years', she told Lacey Rose in 2009. Beyoncé's self-description betrays no embarrassment.

Against this back story, the conception of Beyoncé as an entertainer appears one-dimensional. She has become what Christopher Lasch once called ‘propaganda for commodities – for the replacement of things by commodities, use value by exchange values, and events by images’ (1991, p. 520); or, to use a phrase of Tom Odhiambo’s, a prominent ‘driver’ of a culture characterised by ‘unbridled consumption’ (2008, p. 73).¹

For Daniel Harris, Beyoncé and other celebrities, ‘have turned us into quiescent spectators who worship an unattainable ideal’ (2008, p. 137). Is this fair? Are we really so inactive and reverential? Perhaps some fans exalt their faux goddess, but consumers are hardly inactive: at the very least, they go shopping for goods – and perhaps ideas.

Some might imagine Beyoncé’s ability to continually create new demands and new dissatisfaction that can be assuaged only by the consumption of commodities is testimony to her cultural influence. Less obviously, there is an ethos that she promotes: it is that racism may yet not be eradicated but its effects can be nullified, not by confronting it, but by ignoring it and involving oneself in a life that emphasises impulse rather than calculation, profligacy rather than thrift, the individual rather than society.

Perhaps surrounding oneself with commodities will not make racism disappear, but it softens its impact. This message, or the ‘celebrity narrative’, has been instrumental in establishing Beyoncé as what Gabler calls a ‘modern denominator’ – a figure capable of unifying others, ‘not only distracting them . . . but also giving them a point of common reference’ (2009).

Past race

According to Christopher E. Bell, celebrity culture ‘reinforces the ideological fallacy that “anyone can make it”’ (2010, p. 49). ‘It is a “myth of success” . . . However, one of the myth’s ambiguities is whether success is possible for anyone, regardless of talent or application’; or, presumably, ethnic background. Oprah Winfrey helps to disambiguate.

During her varied career Oprah has moved beyond the parameters or conventional limits of showbusiness and involved herself in all kinds of projects that have wide-ranging, sometimes global relevance. She has also attracted critics such as Tammy Johnson, who objurgates Oprah: ‘She safely reduces all things racial to the personal, sidestepping the hard questions of institutionalised racial oppression and white privilege’ (2002, p. 34).

Other notable figures, such as Denzel Washington and Halle Berry, have become so famous that their names no longer need to be prefaced with ‘black actor’. Any number of other musicians, including Lenny Kravitz and Mariah Carey, has manoeuvred their way onto the A-list without ever reminding audiences of their ethnic origins or descent. This is what is sometimes known as transcending race. Michael Jordan had this facility ‘to transcend race and signify multiple desirable qualities, including hard work, achievement, family orientation, trustworthiness and affability’, as Eileen Kennedy and Laura Hills describe it (2009, p. 3).

Beyoncé has never knowingly identified herself as an African American woman, nor has she ever denied it, as Tiger Woods often has, describing himself instead as ‘Cablinasian’, his own amalgam of *Ca* for Caucasian, *bl* for black, *in* for Indian, plus *Asian*.

Ignoring race, ethnicity or culture as a defining aspect of her identity could be interpreted as Beyoncé’s attempt to rid herself of traditional nomenclature or designations. If so it is a bold and, in the event, successful effort, its success owing much to the cultural environment from which she emerged. After 11 September 2001, Americans became more preoccupied with emphasising their similarities rather than differences. So, when Beyoncé

claimed to Jonathan Van Meter, 'I'm universal . . . no one's paying attention to what race I am. I've kind of proven myself. I'm past that', it seemed plausible (2009).

Nevertheless, Beyoncé slid comfortably into a tradition of exoticism that had been passed through the generations by black female performers, including Josephine Baker (1906–75), Eartha Kitt (1927–2008) and Vanessa Williams (1963–) (see Leeds Craig, 2002.²

A Methodist, but not so pious that she would not exploit her own sexuality, Beyoncé is popularly credited with introducing the term 'Bootylicious', meaning sexually attractive ('booty' is slang for buttocks). This was the title of a track on Destiny's Child's 2001 CD *Survivor*: 'Is my body too bootylicious for you babe? I don't think you're ready for this jelly'.

'Jelly roll' was used in traditional blues music as well as jazz and rock 'n' roll, usually analogously with women's genitals. Comparing African American women's bodies with delectable food 'taps deep undercurrents in American pop culture', according to Fabio Parasecoli (2007, p. 113). Historically, African American women have had a crucial role 'in this loose network of signifiers that include pleasure, desire, spite, pride, shame, and last but not least, nourishment' (2007, p. 112).

Parasecoli believes: 'Beyoncé Knowles has emerged as a nodal point in this discourse' (2007, p. 112). He supports this claim by describing how Beyoncé has, through her music and films, permitted, or perhaps actively contributed to an 'objectification' – by which, I presume, he means she has been complicit in altering her status to that of an object of desire, which expresses itself as a consumable item (like food, in fact). Parasecoli quotes from Destiny's Child's 2005 'Check on it', which was co-written by Beyoncé: 'If you got it, flaunt it'.

Parasecoli's reference to the 'objectification' of Beyoncé is worth expanding because it illustrates how a simple human freedom – to exhibit one's suitably covered body – was turned into a tradeable product. The process was satirised playfully by the singer Fergie, whose 2006 'Fergalicious' was a transparent spoof on Beyoncé: 'You can see me. You can't squeeze me. I got reasons why I tease 'em'.

Meredith Levande includes fellow flaunter Jennifer Lopez in her criticism: 'J.Lo and the "bootylicious" Beyoncé show a direct links between women in pop music and pornographic symbols' (2008, p. 299). For Levande, they, together with Pink and Britney Spears, retard feminist causes and 'reinforce the myth that power is attained when one's body is on display' (2008, p. 302)

Incidentally, Lopez has drawn the disapproval of her fans 'for using her body as a commodity'. Jillian M. Baez's research on the response to J.Lo, particularly from Latina fans, indicates disapproval of the New York-born (Puerto Rican parents) performer: 'In particular, they [fans] were dismayed by how Lopez's image has "whitened" through dying her hair blonde and losing weight as she has gained popularity with mainstream audiences' (2007, p. 11).

Beyoncé's hair has provoked the ire of some writers. Rochelle Spencer, in the *African American Review*, groans at the homogeneous coifing of successful women singers with 'hair the color of Halloween candy corn – that bright sticky orange-yellow blonde that every female pop star (Brittany [sic], Chistina [sic], Beyonce [sic], J-Lo) had to wear in order to be successful (2004, p. 710).

Note Spencer's clause '*had to wear*', presumably implying that ethnic women are permitted to succeed on condition that they make concessions to white tastes. This has echoes of Jan Nederveen Pieterse's argument that white society has historically accepted, even rejoiced in the brilliance of illustrious blacks, but only if they did not challenge the

paternity of white society that produced them and gave them their big chance (1992). In Nederveen Pieterse's view, black stars have been welcome only if they were prepared to make accommodations.

Perhaps lightening hair is one such accommodation. Lightening facial skin definitely is. In 2008, L'Oreal denied that it lightened Beyoncé's skin for an advertisement which appeared in the magazine *Elle*. When compared to the picture in the same advertisement appearing in *Essence*, a magazine with a predominantly black readership, Beyoncé's pigmentation looked paler.³

Baez shows that Latina women resented not only Lopez's provocative dress and, *pace* Beyoncé, the accentuation of her backside, but to her complicity with the media in allowing her body to be 'used as a commodity through which racial hierarchies are imposed' (2007, p. 11).

Perhaps Baez has a point, although Beyoncé seems to issue a different kind of pulse. Far from imposing or prolonging racial hierarchies – and by this, I take Baez to mean the time-honoured cultural order, which consigns black and ethnic minority Americans to levels below that of whites – the ethnically protean Beyoncé helps to erase the memory of such hierarchies.

Part of the solution, or in denial?

The image of racial order of yore has been vitiated by the rise of a new variety of celebrity: acquisitive, ambitious, flamboyantly successful and individualistic; the kind of people who were interested in channelling their energies into their own careers, rather into indeterminate causes. Philosophising on racial inequality was not an activity associated with Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Tiger Woods, Jamie Foxx or any of the other members of the ethnic elite. Is it too cynical to suggest they have been advised to avoid pricking the conscience of America? Perhaps they are mindful of the cautionary case of Kanye West, who was widely denounced after declaring about the then President, 'George Bush doesn't care about black people', during a televised appeal for victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (available from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIUzLpO1kxI> accessed 6 January 2010).

The reaction seemed out of proportion to the criticism of a President who had endured far more challenging broadsides. Black celebrities can pontificate upon the plight of rainforests, world poverty or natural disasters with impunity, but a remark about racism occasions calamity. This presumably impairs the eagerness of black celebrities to espouse the cause of the majority of African Americans: they are punished for their supposed transgressions. Perhaps this is the reason for Beyoncé's studied detachment: she remains silent on what remains one of America's most sensitive subjects.

It seems possible to argue that, when it comes to race, no one is completely without guilt or innocence. He may not have been the first person to utter it but, in 1968, when black power leader Eldridge Cleaver pronounced, 'you're either part of the solution or you're part of the problem', he presented a direct and simple choice to a generation (Scheer 1969, p. 32).

The choice is in need of revision. Celebrities such as Beyoncé are clearly part of a solution: they have succeeded spectacularly in a culture that was, in Cleaver's time, torn asunder by racism. The problem, such as it is, concerns the extent to which Beyoncé and company are presenting a misleading impression: that America's racial history is exactly that – *history*.

In 1944, when Myrdal came to the much-quoted conclusion that: 'the overwhelming majority of white Americans desire that there be as few Negroes as possible in America'

(1995, p. 167), the country was still 11 years away from the incident that started the epic civil rights protest and 20 years away from the desegregation of public schools (among other institutions). Relics of America's past might remain, but through a combination of injunction and education the nation has removed the more noticeable aspects of racism.

In 2003 Julian Bond, then chair of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, used the term 'discrimination denial' to describe the United States' refusal to accept the persistence of racism: 'Opinion polls reveal that the majority of whites believe that racial discrimination is no longer a major impediment for people of color', declared Bond (in a report published by the JBHE Foundation 2003/04, p. 72).

Nevertheless, 'Rosy's view of the current racial picture are at wide variance with reality', added Bond, whose views were supplemented in the same report by those of David Brion Davis: 'Today our entire musical entertainment, and sports industries are deeply dependent on African-American contributions, which also extend to advertising and many other areas, which were entirely "white" even in the 1950s and 1960s' (2004, p. 72).

However, as the report documented, other more prosaic sectors of society, including public schools and housing, were still 'tragically segregated' and a disproportionate number of black males were imprisoned. Other disparities in experience are evident in more recent research. Ingrid Gould Ellen and Katherine O'Regan's investigation into crime patterns in US cities, for instance, suggests: 'Racial minorities were more likely than whites to live in communities that are economically marginalized, socially disorganized, and characterized by high rates of crime' (2009, p. 26).

Even in the key area of education, which was a target for reform in the 1960s, vestiges of segregation remain. 'Seldom can one find a public school in a major American city where black and white students have opportunities to interact as classmates in the same programs', writes James Jennings (2008, p. 11).

While there are many more black students in institutes of higher education in than in the 1960s, Jennings reports that they often study in environments that are hostile to their presence.

Despite the lack of progress in many areas, African Americans made significant inroads politically from 1980: elected mayors in Boston, Chicago and New York paved the way for several governorships and, of course, the highest political office in the nation. Less visible, but no less important, was the steadily climbing number of black voters who, collectively, gave African Americans the political muscle so critical in the election of representatives.

Dream for sale

Beyoncé's narrative has no theme of black history or distinct identity: only a wish-fulfilment fantasy that portrays the hard-earned success of a black woman in a culture largely purged of its historical iniquities. In this sense it is perfectly attuned to the optimistic social vision of Barack Obama's presidency. It could also be argued that the narrative served to divert consumers from the mounting feelings of frustration felt by many African Americans during the often-painful past half-century.

In 2003, the year of the release of Beyoncé's first solo album release, a mis-trial was declared after a jury was deadlocked on whether a police officer was guilty of assaulting a teenage African American named Donovan Jackson. A year before, in the Inglewood district of Los Angeles, police handcuffed Jackson, then 16, and slammed him into a patrol car. Like the beating of Rodney King in 1991, the incident was videotaped. Unlike the King case, the jury's verdict did not occasion rioting across the nation. While King was, and perhaps still is, an iconic presence in US race relations, Jackson is relatively unknown.

Nothing stays still for long in America. Even so, race has been a constant source of conflict. From the 17th century until the 13th amendment of 1865, racism both rationalised and complemented slavery. Legal segregation, civil rights protests and black power resistance followed, but without obliterating race from the American cultural landscape. Purposive efforts to eradicate race through affirmative action, equal opportunity and other policy initiatives lessened the negative impact of race from the late 1960s, but the torment continued and the racial order remained.

The supposition that the traditional racial hierarchy could be eased out of existence instead of destroyed was raised memorably in E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie*, first published in 1955 (as *Bourgeoisie Noire*). Franklin Frazier discerned aspirational black people, prone not to spending energy on fighting racism but to pursuing individual ambitions.

More recently, Timothy B. Neary has reflected: 'Still crowded in segregated urban ghettos and denied the vote in recalcitrant southern cities, postwar African Americans, nevertheless began to identify themselves as "consumer citizens"' (2010, p. 120).

Terrene expectations gave way to other aspirations, according to Neary: 'The extensive range of modern media exposed them [African Americans] to a world of middle-class material abundance, a dream for sale that appeared within reach' (2010, p. 120).

The research by Clint Wilson and Félix Gutiérrez into the portrayal of ethnic groups by the media complemented this: in 1985 they examined the market's response to aspirational blacks: 'Advertisers promote consumption of their products as a shortcut to the good life, a quick fix for low-income consumers' (1985, p. 128).

The particular conception of the 'good life' they have in mind is imagined as a cornucopia of material goods. 'You may not be able to live in the best neighborhoods, wear the best clothes, or have the best job, but you can drink the same liquor, smoke the same cigarettes, and drive the same car as those who do' is how Wilson and Gutiérrez summarised the advertisers' message to black consumers.

Wilson and Gutiérrez's analysis is sober in its conclusions. While advertisers were wooing African Americans into consumer culture, 'a system of inequality that keeps them below national norms in education, housing, income, health and other indicators' remained (1985, p. 130). The findings are consistent with others presented in this essay.

Bell, as I noted earlier, has argued that celebrity culture has perpetrated a falsehood, what he calls 'an ideological fallacy' (2010, p. 49). The cultural democracy supposedly introduced by celebrity culture is now a constituent part of a more equal society in which class has receded in importance. The impression that the racial hierarchy has disappeared is also fallacious. To Bell's observation we should add that discomfort with persistent inequalities is arguably less than it was 10 years ago. Why?

More than two decades after Wilson and Gutiérrez's reminder, there were many successful African Americans who enjoyed opulent lifestyles, elevated status and the kind of wealth that would have been unimaginable for most of the 1980s. Beyoncé was one of them, of course.

All celebrities exhibit themselves in a way that makes them resemble merchandise – articles of trade that can be bought and sold in the marketplace. Like Beyoncé, they help to sell products from movie tickets, DVDs and CDs to the cars, colognes and designer labels they customarily endorse. They also embody exchange values. As such, they are living commodities themselves: their very presence, whether at a première or at the gym, has value, if for no other reason than we are interested enough to pay for it (how many celebrity magazines feature pictures of stars driving, shopping or just doing nothing in particular?) They are also human signposts for what Wilson and Gutiérrez called 'a short cut to the good life'. The researchers like Lasch, allude to the prospect of a cul-

ture of extravagant consumption where an endless cycle of voracious desire maintains the demand for commodities, where shopping is close to being the most fundamental human experience.

The consumer culture in which celebrities command attention, occasionally adulation and, routinely, emulation is predicated on the principle that anything – *anything* – is tradeable. In other words, it can be bought and sold in a market. Could this include the end of racism? More specifically, an end to the manifold effects of racism on any consumer with means enough to buy high-end products.

‘How can you say racism is still a problem in the US?’ might be a near-rhetorical question asked by Middle Americans. ‘Look at Beyoncé and all the other black celebrities like Jay-Z, Alicia Keys or Jamie Foxx. They earn billions; racism didn’t bother them, did it?’ Here is the didactic import of the Beyoncé narrative. We need not impute motives or political sentiments to the celebrities to discern their impact. Racism is easier to ignore or forget when one is presented with tempting tableaux of distracting commodities.

When Gabler submits, ‘Human entertainment is not simply a carnival personified’, he understands that celebrities are more than amusements or agreeable distraction. They offer histories, descriptions, records or parables in a way that dramatises and instructs and we, the consumers, recognise a fable about entertainment’s power to enchant and the celebrity’s role as emollient interlocutor. *The author can be seen discussing this paper at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdg1XZqNk8U>.*

Notes

1. By ‘driver’, I presume Odhiambo refers to whatever supplies force
2. Whites’ fascination with black women’s bodies has a history dating back to the early 19th century when Saartjie Baartman, known popularly as the ‘Hottentot Venus’, was taken from South Africa to London and, later, Paris where she was exhibited on stage, at times in a cage. In 1810, Baartman’s body was the object of sexual curiosity and perhaps desire as well as scientific inquiry (see Wills, 2010)
3. Compare in ‘The Beyoncé ad and skin bleaching’, *Los Angeles Times*, 12 August 2008 (available from: <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/alltheage/2008/08/black-women-and.html/> accessed 5 February 2010). For an expansion of the discourse on black women’s hair, see Banks, 2000; Rooks, 1996

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