

## Selling Mixedness: Marketing with Multiracial Identities

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Strange to wake up and realize you're in style.

—Danzy Senna (1998: 12)

Since the mid-1990s, social scientists have spent a considerable amount of time speculating about the meaning of and impact on group boundaries of the growing numbers of interracial families and multiracial-identified people in the United States. Most of that analysis has centered on the state. What would it mean, researchers have asked, if the state allowed and enumerated multiple race responses? How would such responses affect civil rights enforcement, and what do patterns of intermarriage between groups say about which racial boundaries matter most? (see Chapter 4, this volume; Gans 1999; Perlmann and Waters 2002; Sanjek 1996).

In our attempts to understand the social implications of new racial categories and increased interracial intimacy, however, we have ignored one of the most far-reaching and consequential institutions likely to shape new racial identifications and their meanings in the years to come—the marketplace. When the Census 2000 multirace data was released to the public, marketing industry professionals wasted no time in accessing and interpreting it. In 2001, the marketing magazine *American Demographics* began a series of articles examining and interpreting the new multirace numbers. Marketers are eager to understand the significance of a range of characteristics that delineate this demographic, most notably its largely urban and coastal geographic dispersal, its ethnic patterning, and its relatively young age.

Not surprisingly, marketers are also interested in the buying power of multiracials. According to a report by the Selig Center for Economic Growth, at \$148 billion, the buying power of multiracials is about one-quarter that of African Americans but over three times that of Native Americans. Multiracial

buying power is expected to increase at a faster rate than that of blacks or whites in the next few years (projected growths of 32.7 percent, 30 percent, and 26.5 percent, respectively, by 2007; see Humphreys 2002).

Currently marketers know only the broadest demographic characteristics of the multiracial population. What they seek to find out is who "the multiracial consumer" is—her tastes, habits, and beliefs—in order to market to her. According to one marketing analyst, "the growth of multiracial America . . . means that the time to figure out what multiracial means to today's consumers, whether it creates specific consumer marketing or communication needs, and exactly how to tap into the market was about five minutes ago, and it's time to catch up fast" (Wellner 2002).

Not only have corporate marketers been devising strategies to identify and target messages at "the multiracial consumer," but entrepreneurs have also begun to develop products designed to appeal to multiracials.<sup>1</sup> These entrepreneurs are largely of mixed descent or live in interracial families. They sell items like shampoo and greeting cards, each tailored to the specific "needs" of multiracial consumers. This marketing *by* multiracials, like the marketing *to* multiracials by mainstream companies, is about selling for profit. It is also motivated by—according to its purveyors—a desire for social recognition.

The creation of products for and the development of consumer profiles about multiracials is a new phenomenon. A relationship between marketing and multiracials, however, predates the ability to count this population. During the 1990s, racially ambiguous people and even interracial intimate scenes began to appear in advertisements designed to appeal to a broad, ethnically nonspecific audience. The construction of such images requires no knowledge about multiracials and their putatively unique habits and needs. Rather, their impact and advertisers' motivation for using such images lie in their symbolism—the ability to evoke for a viewer positive qualities, feelings, or desires. Of course, multiracialism's capacity to invoke such desirable qualities and even what is considered "desirable" are historically and context-specific.

Danzy Senna is right. Multiracials are definitely in style. But *why* are they "in style"? Moreover, what does the marketing of multiraciality imply about contemporary modes of racial formation and racial justice? Despite the fact that social scientists have long looked at consumption as a major means through which Americans define their identities and compete for social status (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1994), researchers have only just begun to explore the relationship between consumer culture and ethnic identity formation. Marilyn Halter (2000) demonstrates marketers' increasing reliance on ethnicity as a hook to stimulate demand for their product and develop brand loyalty. Moreover, she argues that the marketplace is a site through which people learn representations of ethnic groups (their own and others) and through which they can participate and enact culture. Arlene

Davila (2001) argues that marketers shape public perceptions of the culture as well as the relevance and influence of racial groups by determining the kinds of racialized images we see.

### ■ Marketing Multiraciality in the Age of Target Marketing

Mass marketing—crafting one-size-fits-all messages—reached its peak at midcentury. Since the 1940s, segmented marketing has steadily supplanted it. The difference between the two strategies, simply put, is that mass marketing approaches differentiate between products, while market segmentation differentiates between consumers.<sup>2</sup>

Segmentation by race and ethnicity did not begin to gather momentum in the industry until the late 1960s. As early as the 1940s, however, companies began to recognize the money to be made by getting African Americans to buy their products. To capture black dollars, they began to advertise their products in black-owned and consumed media outlets. Lizabeth Cohen (2003) dubs these early attempts to reach African Americans "color-blind advertising" because the ads used were largely the same as those featured in mainstream media outlets. Many African Americans saw the mere fact that companies were advertising in black media outlets as a symbol of greater social acceptance. Gradually, African Americans called for advertisements that included black people and reflected their culture. In response, companies began to craft messages specifically designed to reach African American consumers (and later Latinos and Asian Americans). By the late 1990s, we began to see the creation of advertisements with all-black casts that appeared in mainstream media outlets and which appealed to a mass audience. Budweiser's "Whassup?!!" campaign is perhaps the most successful example of this phenomenon. Despite its success, the use of all-nonwhite casts to reach ethnically nonspecific consumers is still a rare event (Walker 2003, Wynter 2002).

From one vantage point, marketers' interest in multiracials looks like just another manifestation of the ethnic target marketing in which they have engaged for years. Recognizing a growing multiracial population with purchasing power, marketers seek to attract their dollars and so begin to market to that population. From another point of view, the marketing of multiraciality appears different than marketing toward other ethnic groups. When marketers began to court African American dollars, African Americans were already defined as a distinct social group with distinctive values and ways of thinking and acting. Multiracials are not yet so clearly defined. The category "multiracial" encompasses people of a broad range of racial and ethnic ancestry combinations. One could argue that this situation is no different from the construction of Latinos and Asian Americans as racialized groups in which diverse immigrant populations are lumped into overarching categories on the

basis of language difference (e.g., Spanish) or the logic of racial sameness (e.g., Asian). The “lumping” of a diverse group of multiracials, however, is predicated on the logic of *multiraciality*, within which language, tradition, and racial identification vary.

Such variability poses a challenge for marketers figuring out just who “the multiracial consumer” is. The challenge, however, is not insurmountable. To a considerable degree, when marketers recognize and cater to market segments, they have contributed to reinforcing those divisions (Davila 2001, Cohen 2003). As a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, they create what they appear to only reflect and feed back to consumers an image of what they are supposed to be (Frank 2000). In this respect as well, however, multiracial marketing may prove to work differently. As I discuss in more detail later, some marketers do indeed emphasize the commonalities among multiracials and their collective *difference from* “monoracials.” This will likely strengthen some segment of the population’s sense that multiracials are a distinct class of people. Much of the marketing of multiraciality, however, emphasizes an ideal of racial harmony and the transcendence of racial division through racial blending and cultural hybridity.

### ■ Defining the Multiracial Consumer and Identifying Her Needs

Despite the diversity of the multiracial population, marketers appear to be developing a profile of just who the multiracial consumer is. Much of that profile is driven by demographic data (see Table 12.1). In an early article on the multirace data published in *Forecast*, the concentration of multiracials in Hawaii is highlighted. Hawaii, we are told, “is home to the nation’s largest share of multiracial consumers.” The author goes on to characterize the Hawaii data as the “first look at the multiracial market” and informs us that multiracials in Hawaii are “more likely to live with family than average” (Wellner 2001). In subsequent articles in *American Demographics*, researchers pay more attention to the racial breakdown of this population and delineate multiracial buying power by ethnic subgroup (the greatest of which, according to industry analyses, is that of Asian-white biracials; see Whelan 2001). They are particularly attuned to the age of multiracials, who are disproportionately young. Of the two or more races population, 42 percent is under age eighteen, compared to 25 percent of those who indicated one race only (US Bureau of the Census 2001c).

Demographics, however, merely sketch the contours of a multiracial market, alerting marketers to its statistical existence and general characteristics. They do not by themselves constitute markets. The creation of a market requires some interpretation of what those numbers mean—of what makes this demographic different from others. To get a better sense of how a multiracial market is being constructed, a good place to look is at the

**Table 12.1 Selected Population and Economic Characteristics by Race**

	Multiracial <sup>a</sup>	Black	Asian	White
2000 population (in millions)	6.8	34.7	10.2	211.5
US population (percentage)	2.4	12.3	3.6	75.1
Under 18 years old (percentage)	41.9	31.4	— <sup>b</sup>	23.5
Geographic dominance (percentage)	40.0	54.8	48.8	34.4
	West	South	West	South
Buying power (in billions of dollars) <sup>c</sup>	148.1	588.7	254.6	5,800

Source: US Bureau of the Census 2001c, 2002; Humphreys 2002.

Notes: a. “Multiracial” refers to those who marked more than one race on the census. All other race figures are for those who chose single-race responses.

b. No data available.

c. Buying power is another term for disposable personal income, defined as “the share of total personal income that is available for spending on personal consumption, personal interest payments, and savings” (Humphreys 2002: 8).

companies developing products specifically for multiracial consumers. Curls is one such company. Curls bills itself as “a premium, ethnic hair care company whose purpose is to deliver quality products that cater to the unique needs of today’s multi-ethnic market.” The company tagline reads “Curls. . . . Because your curly hair is different from the rest” ([www.curls.biz](http://www.curls.biz)).

Purveyors of the various products developed specifically for multiracial consumers—be they books, conditioners, or cards—emphasize a special need that they claim multiracial consumers share. The owners of Melting Pot Gifts, for example, have developed a line of interracial-themed greeting cards. They assert that the need for such cards arises from the “substantial number of interracial families and couples,” many of whom, they claim, “want cards that look like them. Children of these couples are reassured by cards with pictures of children that reflect their identity” ([www.meltingpotgifts.com](http://www.meltingpotgifts.com)).

“Need” is a highly malleable and manipulable concept. Making decisions about what we buy often involves distinguishing between our need for the thing purchased and our desire for it. In some cases, like clean water and food, most of us can agree we need such things, for without them we will die. In other cases, such as when a child claims he “needs” the latest electronic game, most of us would agree that is not a need but rather a desire. Needs and desires, however, are not always so clearly distinguishable. What we strongly desire, we often feel we desperately need. Moreover, different people define needs and desires differently (Baudrillard 2000).

It is standard operating procedure in the marketing arena to make desires feel like needs. The rationale of need serves a twofold purpose. First, claiming people need a particular item is intended to make the case that the product performs a service. Second, claiming that a group has needs to be met reinforces the idea that the group is distinctive from others

as it stimulates demand. In the world of advertising, the delineation of needs goes hand in hand with the construction of a market.<sup>3</sup>

The promotions for Curls delineate a market of "bi/multi racial women and girls with naturally curly hair" for whom Curls was "truly created." According to Curls, *Women's Wear Daily* was set to focus a "spotlight" on the company in the December 2003 issue that would have discussed "the needs of multi ethnic hair care, and how CURLS is fulfilling an unfulfilled need in an overlooked market."<sup>4</sup> In an example of even more specific market segmentation, Curls has created a line of products marketed specifically to "racially mixed *girls* with naturally curly hair" (my emphasis). It is called "Curly Q's."

What, then, are the needs of multiracial women and girls as seen through the marketing department at Curls? Although the supposedly unique needs of racially mixed girls and women are not explicitly stated in the ad copy, a set of "needs" are delineated nonetheless through the vehicle of "customer reviews." The most often repeated "need" is for a way to control, make shiny, and moisturize one's curls.

A common advertising strategy is to establish (or make claims about) the superiority of one's product—why this shampoo and not others, for example, will do the job. In the testimonials used and company claims made by Curls, however, seldom are the particular ingredients in Curls or Curly Q's discussed. Instead, the market at which the products are pitched serves as endorsement enough for the product itself. That is why in almost every testimonial, the customer's relationship to multiracialism is communicated. Sometimes this relationship to multiracialism is conveyed subtly, as in the following testimonials.

I can't tell you how happy I am with your products. They "understand" my hair. After trying product after product for as long as I can remember, I was thrilled to find Curls. Curls products bring out the best in my biracial hair without weighing my curls down or leaving my hair greasy or "heavy" feeling. . . . Curls lets my hair retain it's [*sic*] own "happy spirit" without taking a [*sic*] time out of my busy schedule. . . . Thanks so much for developing a product that knows my hair! (C. Donnow, [www.curls.biz](http://www.curls.biz))

I absolutely LOVE the products! My hair is moisturized without feeling greasy, and it's soft and swingy—yet the curls and waves are defined. I'm thrilled. Thanks for thinking outside of the box. It's refreshing to be able to use products that are more specific to my biracial hair type, instead of my constant experimental mix-n-match routine. (H. Holliman, [www.curls.biz](http://www.curls.biz))

These descriptions accomplish several tasks at once. First, they establish that mixed-race women share a common dilemma in finding the right products for their hair type. Moreover, the statement that the company "understands" a customer's hair implies that the company—whose president, Mahisha Dellinger, is of mixed descent—has an insider's knowledge

of that presumably unique experience that allowed her to develop the products. At the same time, such descriptions conjure up an image of the characteristics that typify "mixed hair" (defined, shiny curls and waves, not coarse, dull kinks or frizz)—if only the right products are used.

Finally, in these testimonials, racially mixed women's hair is implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, contrasted to that of African American women. About Curly Q's, one couple writes:

we are amazed at the difference the products have made in the texture of our daughter's hair. We have tried just about every African-American hair care product in the market place for children. We have a bi-racial (Black/Caucasian) child and this is the first product in the market place that we have come across that unequivocally has made it easier to maintain our child's hair. . . . We highly recommend the Curly Q's products to all parents of bi-racial children. ([www.curls.biz](http://www.curls.biz))

The delineation of this market has, in my opinion, disconcerting race-making capacities. In order to buy into the rationale that mixed-race women have unique hair care needs, one must believe that the kind of curly hair such women have is different in a generalizable way from the curly hair of racially unmixed women and girls. As we know, however, lots of women (including African American women) have curly hair and have managed to "care" for it all these years without Curls or the statistics necessary to identify a multiracial market. Such a claim relies for its impact on the folk belief that there is an inherent bodily difference between the races that expresses itself in predictable ways when the races mix (without ever needing to say so directly).<sup>5</sup> Although it may be true that many people of partial African descent have corkscrew curls, it is also true that many do not. Moreover, the universe of racially mixed women and girls is far larger than the population of people of partial African descent.

I assume that that the intention of Curls' founder is not to reinscribe biological notions of race, but rather to delineate a characteristic fairly widespread among people of partial African descent (curly hair), package it as a point of cultural uniqueness that unites the racially mixed together, and use that to sell them hair care products. Curls is also capitalizing on the desire of those who purchase it to believe that they are part of a definable, knowable group of women.

### ■ Multiracials as Branding Tool

Even before the 2000 Census reported multirace statistics, images of multiracials were used to sell things. Although certainly not ubiquitous,<sup>6</sup> depictions of multiracials as such began to appear with some regularity during the 1990s. Advertisements for items like jeans, sneakers, laundry detergent, and pain reliever depicted mixed-race people both well known and anonymous.

Multiraciality itself is becoming a branding tool. Unlike target marketing, in which a message or product is created to appeal to a particular demographic, this kind of marketing uses multiracialism to appeal to a mass audience. By definition, such images, created before there were statistics and industry research reports on multiracials, rely on stereotypes, clichés, and dominant ideas of racial mixedness. That is not to suggest that the market research currently proceeding (in large part because statistical data on multiracials are now readily available) will result in more “accurate” depictions of multiracials. Rather, without any empirical information about the basic demographic characteristics of this “group,” the image of multiracials *can only be* based on culturally dominant or resonant ideas about this population.

In the United States, the multiracial body has often served as a resonant symbol for Americans’ racial anxieties. At times multiracials have been vilified as harbingers of the death of particular cultural communities or depicted as manifestations of the degeneracy of human populations or as evidence of their parents’ traitorous disloyalties. They have also been celebrated as “bridges” of racial harmony and unity, possessors of an inherent disposition against prejudice, and a maverick, new people.<sup>7</sup> It probably will surprise no one to learn that advertisements depicting multiracials nearly always employ the latter symbolism. To do the former would be unwise, to say the least, in trying to appeal to a mass audience that includes a near majority nonwhite population. But the growing use of such multiracial images has more to do with convergences between trends in advertising generally and the cultural and social position of multiracials.

Multiracial demographics and the symbolism of racial mixedness fit very nicely into an advertising model that has dominated the industry since the 1970s. “Hip consumerism,” as cultural critic Thomas Frank dubs it, is defined by advertising that draws from the symbols of 1960s counterculture and offers to “help consumers overcome their alienation, to facilitate their nonconformity and . . . celebrate[s] rule breaking and insurrection.” As a commercial style, he argues, hip is everywhere—“a staple of advertising that promises to deliver the consumer from the dreary nightmare of square consumerism” (Frank 1997: 28, 32).

Much of the content of this “hip” consumerism draws from and seeks to appeal to youth. Since the mid-1940s, when the teenage demographic began to be recognized as a unique stage of life “with its own language, customs, and emotional traumas” (Cohen 2003: 319), marketing to teens has expanded exponentially (Linn 2004). Other forms of segmented marketing, not only by race and ethnicity but also age and gender, have as well. For an industry whose *modus operandi* is to craft “hip” messages, target ethnic audiences, and appeal to the young, multiracialism must seem a tailor-made marketing vehicle. First, as industry reports always point out, multiracials are disproportionately young. Forty-two percent of multiracials were born after 1982. In some regions, like parts of Hawaii and the San

Francisco Bay area, they make up a substantial proportion of the local population. The overall growth in interracial births suggests that younger audiences may have more familiarity and comfort with multiracials, particularly in those areas where they are a significant demographic presence.

### ■ Packaged Rebellion

One of the earliest ad campaigns to use interracialism to craft a hip brand image was Benetton. Seeking to associate its brand with a fight against racism, this late 1980s campaign featured a racially mixed cast of models—a relatively rare phenomenon in fashion advertising at the time.<sup>8</sup> The models were often arranged in ways to visually heighten their physical differences—very dark skin, hair, and eyes next to very light. Their attack on social convention was made in the form of posing models in interracial intimate scenes. The campaign garnered the company praise and criticism. The most controversial ad featured a bare-chested black woman breastfeeding a naked white baby. From one perspective the image depicts cross-racial nurturance, caring, and bonding. From another it recalls African American women’s use as wet nurses to white children under slavery.

The Benetton campaign pushed the limits of the public’s tolerance for interracial intimate imagery back in 1988 (Blum 2000). Given the debate it stirred back then, it might be surprising to learn that two decades earlier, Mattel had created a mixed-race doll and marketed her as Barbie’s cousin. “Colored Francie” was at once ahead of and behind her time, as her name (outdated even thirty-seven years ago) makes clear. When they brought her to market in 1967, company officials misread the demand for such a doll. She was discontinued after poor sales and concerns that she promoted interracialism (DuCille 1996, Halter 2000). Ironically, her unpopularity thirty-seven years ago has resulted in her being a very hot (and pricey) collectors item among doll enthusiasts.<sup>9</sup> Currently there is no Barbie explicitly marketed as a multiracial doll, but Mattel has developed a line of racially ambiguous friends of Barbie (that’s *friends*, not cousins).

A decade after the Benetton campaign, Levi Strauss began a new campaign to bolster flagging sales of Levi’s jeans. To do so, they sought to appeal to young consumers by crafting a campaign that centered on “assertions of the brand’s authenticity” and that used images that were “familiar yet utterly surprising” (Kane 1998a). As part of that effort, the creative people at TBWA Chiat/Day in San Francisco (Levi Strauss’s ad firm) published an ad showing a brown-skinned woman with a golden afro holding a sign that read, “I can’t be prejudice [*sic*], I’m mulatto.” The ad uses discursively familiar elements of racial mixedness. Decked out in flared low-riding (or is that “hip-hugging”) jeans, her image recalls the 1960s counterculture.

According to its creators, the campaign of which this ad was a part sought to craft an “unconventional, streetwise attitude . . . to take fashion

ads from the catwalk to the sidewalk" (Kane 1998b). Mixed ethnicity symbolized this "attitude," as many of the ads, some illustrations, "blend ethnicities and blur racial definitions." According to the ad manager on the project, the campaign is "a virtual melting pot of cultures and races linked by similar interests and diversity." Although the "mulatto" ad is supposed to be streetwise, authentic, and hip, the mixed-race character's use of an outdated, even offensive, term to refer to herself belies such assertions: The notion that multiracials cannot be prejudiced is a recurring (if absurd) conceit about multiracialism. Finally, the misspelling of "prejudiced" is, I suspect, included for an added dose of "streetwise authenticity." According to a marketer working on a related Levi's campaign at the time, the creators of the ad seemed unaware of what she called the "ridiculous" and "offensive" nature of the ad. The creators, she said, "didn't get it." She attributed their lack of sensitivity to the fact that all of them were white. Whether or not their whiteness explains the content of the ad, I do not know. Neither do I know if the Levi's marketers "didn't get it." But maybe they did not have to. Advertisements sell fantasy, not necessarily reality. The image of the "mulatto" used in this ad represents what people (or at least the makers of the image) want to believe and communicate about multiracials.

#### ■ "I Am Tiger Woods": Multiracials as Symbols of the "New Economy"

Levi Strauss was not the only company to capitalize on the symbolism of multiracials for marketing. Since the mid-1990s, companies like IKEA, Tylenol, Nike, Verizon, and General Electric have featured multiracials in their ads. Although multiracials were sometimes used to convey authenticity or rebellion, they were also used as symbols of the "new." The "unexpected" that marketers in the age of hip consumerism were after is embodied in the juxtaposition of racialized physical features in one body. This "look" has been particularly sought after in an era of technological change and globalization. According to casting agent Jerry Saviola, "The multiracial look screams 'current, youthful, and urban.' And it also evokes a certain authenticity. . . . Eight strawberry blondes in a cybercafe wouldn't be realistic" (Whelan 2001). I think it is safe to assume that if this advertiser saw several redheads in a café sipping lattes while surfing the Internet he would find it perfectly *realistic*. What he means, rather, is that commercials with all-white casts are conventional, but so too are those with integrated casts. We have seen such images too often for them to signal something new. Images of multiracial people, however, have been relatively rare in media until now and thus awaken the viewer to a change because of their difference. Says another casting agent, Paula Sindlinger, "The mix of Asian facial features and kinky hair . . . conjures up an immediate sense of both

globalization and technology. The blended look says 'we're all in this together' and that the 'world's getting smaller'" (Whelan 2001).

It is perhaps not surprising that in the 1990s, when the rapid development of Internet commerce was hailed as the beginning of a "new economy" in which the old rules no longer applied, multiracials as a "new people" were chosen symbols. Perhaps the best known example of the marriage of multiracials and markets is the relationship between Nike and Tiger Woods. After he became the youngest person to win the Masters in 1997, commentators prophesied that Tiger would democratize the elitist and racially exclusionary game of golf. People of color, they reported, would now become interested in golf. Children from all walks of life would be able to compete on the green unfettered by old rules about money and pedigree (Dorman 1996).

Soon thereafter, Woods signed an endorsement deal with Nike worth an estimated \$30 million. Nike enlisted Woods at a time when it was suffering serious attacks to its public reputation. During the 1990s, Nike had shipped most of its manufacturing jobs overseas to factories in which its employees labored in sweatshop conditions.<sup>10</sup> Nike's public relations offensive sought to rebuild its public image from that of ruthless profit maximizer to that of a "democratized, soulful corporation"—a strategy pursued by many firms at the time (Frank 2000: 252). One of the earliest Nike ads using Tiger's image featured children—boys and girls—of a wide variety of ethnicities on a misty golf course, clubs in hand, looking earnestly into the camera while each uttered in succession, "I am Tiger Woods." Every child, the ad implied, could be Tiger because Tiger was a little bit of everybody. By this time, Tiger's mixed ethnicity was quite well reported. Shortly after the Masters, he had explained to Oprah and her millions of viewers that as a child he had created a name for himself ("cablinasian") that incorporated all of his ethnoracial ancestry. In the Nike ads, Tiger's racial mixedness is positioned as a democratizing, unifying force.

Contrast this portrayal to the use of another famous athlete's image in advertising. Michael Jordan has received perhaps more endorsement deals than any other athlete. Jordan's black silhouette soaring to the hole is immediately associated with Nike.<sup>11</sup> In many of those ads, however, Jordan's athletic accomplishments are portrayed as almost superhuman. Although everyone may have wanted to "be like Mike," such a possibility was merely a fantasy.<sup>12</sup> "I am Tiger Woods," however, says we already are like Tiger, notwithstanding his extraordinary athletic accomplishments. Although they may be as out of reach as those of Jordan, his racial mixedness makes him accessible to all.

Woods is popular as an endorser because of his mixedness, not in spite of it—a point his father Earl Woods recognized early on. Commenting on Tiger's popularity with companies looking for endorsers, Earl Woods told a

*Newsweek* reporter, "For marketing purposes, Tiger's mixed heritage goes off the charts" (Leland and Beals 1997). However, the market appeal of mixed-race bodies extends beyond Woods himself. According to one of my contacts who manages talent featured in ad campaigns, he now receives many requests for so-called ethnically ambiguous actors. This practice is either widespread enough, sexy enough, or both to have warranted an article in a recent Sunday *New York Times* (La Ferla 2003). Why the appeal? Says one executive of an advertising and trend research company, "Both in the mainstream and at the high end of the marketplace, what is perceived as good, desirable, and successful is often a face whose heritage is hard to pin down" (La Ferla 2003: 1).

### ■ Consumer Culture and Racial Justice

The marriage of the market and multiraciality raises several questions about the relationship between consumption and racial justice. For example, what does it say about contemporary modes of racial domination that images invoking interracial mixing are increasingly sought after, when just a few years ago they were rare and when used, as in the Benetton ad, were employed as much for their ability to shock as to "fight racism"? Is multiracials' quest for representation in the marketplace significantly different from that of other ethnoracial groups? What does the focus on representation obscure about other aspects of racial inequality?

Racialized groups have long understood the connections between consumption and racial justice. Organizers of the sit-ins of the civil rights movement, for example, recognized that access to white consumer establishments was essential to ensure blacks' access to a full range of goods and services. They understood as well that the conditions of such access (segregated versus integrated) were symbolic of the level of dignity and respect afforded African Americans in the society at large. Moreover, civil rights organizers understood that owners respond when their profits or livelihoods are threatened. Their actions politicized consumption in order to achieve social justice.

Racialized groups have also understood the importance of representation in media in their quest for full and equal citizenship. Advertising's scope and reach is so extensive that it has the power to shape public perceptions of social groupings: which ones exist, their relevance, and their influence. As such, civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and National Council of La Raza monitor the degree and kind of representations of African Americans and Latinos in advertisements.

Moreover, in public discourse of late, politicians explicitly equate consumption with democratic participation and good citizenship. Increasingly, they encourage citizens to view themselves in a market relationship to

government. We are encouraged to shop around for social services and to "vote with our pocketbooks" to signal our political preferences and beliefs. In times of economic downturn, politicians and economic analysts encourage Americans to consume more as a means of doing our part for the country by way of stimulating the economy (see Cohen 2003; Klinenberg 2002).

Like other racialized groups in the United States, multiracials couch their demands for full recognition as citizens with calls for companies to recognize them as a market. Mary Murchison-Edwards of the Interracial Club of Buffalo, for example, encourages people to buy products with multiracial themes, whether or not they reflect one's family background. She says, "We need to show there's a market for these products by supporting the companies that make them" (Van Kerckhove 2005).

One could assume that Murchison-Edwards believes recognition as a market is a proxy for greater social recognition as a group. Given advertising media's reach, that is likely. The question, then, becomes whether social recognition is equivalent to social justice. It strikes me as an ironic twist of the politics of consumption that racialized groups not only welcome but also seek out the opportunity to be pitched to—to be *sold*, as it were. The danger in the marketing of multiracialism (or any other ethnoracial identity) is not that multiracials will receive social recognition.<sup>13</sup> Rather, it is when "recognition" (be it in the form of representation in advertisements or in the census) is substituted for a politics of civic and economic equality. Boycotts and representation in advertisements are not the same thing. The former uses consumption as a leverage point to secure something else—access to institutions, fair wages, or respect, for example. The latter treats consumption as a political end in itself and is oriented toward the right to consume more—to be marketed to—and is delinked from broader social concerns.

In the ways that multiraciality is being marketed, there is cause for both optimism and concern. A commercial for a pain reliever (Children's Tylenol, 2002) in which a white father stays home from work to care for his ailing Asian son is a welcome representation of interracial intimacy. The decision to use a white mother and her daughter of African descent in an ad for pain reliever (Motrin IB, 2001) when interracialism is not the focus of the message is a subtle recognition of changing social norms concerning race. Yet, although there are more representations of interracial intimacy in popular culture than in the past, such ads are rare. Many companies are reluctant to use such images, concerned that they are inconsistent with their brand's image or that they will offend their customer base.<sup>14</sup>

Currently advertisers use interracial imagery in a limited set of lifestyle contexts and to invoke a rather narrow set of feelings. Too often, advertisements featuring images of multiraciality repeat rather than challenge racial stereotypes. The images of multiracials now put forth by advertisers echo older images of the mulatto but include only those elements that are putatively positive in the age of hip consumerism. She is a bridge between racial



groups, one who goes against social convention, and one who signals the future. Like the image of the Hispanic consumer generated by advertisers, the image of the multiracial is "not altogether an original development. Instead, it is better regarded as an archetype, constituted by motifs that, while adaptable, persist across generations" (Davila 2001: 61).<sup>15</sup>

Such "archetypes" obscure more about social reality than they illuminate. Although some analysts would like to claim that the marketing of multiraciality reflects a trend toward a "post-racial America" (Walker 2003), this assessment is premature. Note that nearly every article about multiracial public figures, be it Tiger Woods, Vin Diesel, or Mariah Carey, says something about the significance of their racial mixedness. That which receives so much attention can hardly have been transcended. Rather, I think it more accurate to say that the interest in mixed-race bodies and particularly in multiracial celebrities is an example of what Thomas Holt has identified as "a shift in the terrain of racism." "Could it be," he asks, "that the issue now is less the utter ignorance of other cultures, as in times past, but too great a surface (sound-bite) familiarity; less stereotypes of the other than the voracious consumption of its metonymic parts?" (2000: 108).<sup>16</sup>

The implications of the marketing of multiraciality for racial justice are economic as well. Some analysts suggest that the "ethnically ambiguous" trend signals the impending decline of niche marketing. The multiracial data, says one marketer, "takes the pressure off agencies to play it ethnically" (Whelan 2001). If many consumers connect with and respond to a multiracial actor, the logic goes, why craft several different campaigns targeted toward discrete ethnic communities? (Walker 2003).<sup>17</sup> In trying to develop consumers' identification with a message, some advertisers see the racial ambiguity of multiracial bodies as an asset because, it is presumed, viewers from many ethnoracial groups will search for and usually find something in an ambiguous appearance with which they can identify.<sup>18</sup> In other words, multiracials may help companies capture market share while simultaneously lowering their costs.

Attention to issues of multiculturalism and cultural hybridity is also influencing advertising firm creation. Firms specializing in ethnic markets have tended to specialize in one ethnic group (i.e., Asian American or African American consumers). These firms have tended to have a subcontractual relationship with what are known in the industry as "general market" (i.e., white) firms. Recently, however, ethnic niche firms have joined forces to combine their expertise in order to compete for a wider range of business. One such firm—GlobalHue—formed in 1999. Chief Executive Officer Don Coleman merged his African American urban market agency (DCA) with that of Montemayor Asociados, a Hispanic firm based in San Antonio, and Innovasia, an Asian American firm in Los Angeles. In 2003 it was ranked the top ethnic advertising agency in *Black Enterprise's* annual survey (based on annual billings) (Hughes 2003). At the same time, other

firms position themselves to reach consumers who cross traditional ethnic boundaries. The True Agency, formed in 2000, has published its own book detailing its marketing philosophy and strategy, called "Transculturalism." Despite the growth in multicultural marketing, however, the reality of racial segregation in the United States means that those companies who primarily advertise through direct mail or local media will continue to craft messages specific to one ethnoracial group (Wellner 2002).

Marketers explain their interest in multiracials as simply another form of ethnic target marketing, and that it is. But it is also part and parcel of a process of group making. Marketers have become aware of a multiracial market in large part because this population is now statistically visible. Ever in search of new markets, they will proceed by conducting research on this population so as to understand better how to appeal to its desires. Whether they actually uncover anything unique about this demographic's tastes, values, practices, or beliefs, marketers will continue to use images of multiracials in their advertising because they know this population is growing.<sup>19</sup>

In the world of advertising, increasingly marketers describe their research efforts as "ethnography," which implies that they have identified a social group whose habits and lifeways they seek to uncover. What this portrayal leaves out is the extent to which the cultures that marketers claim to merely represent are in part their own creations. The issue is not that marketers fabricate their messages independent of social context. Quite the contrary: they draw on existing culturally resonant narratives of the meaning of racial mixedness for the purpose of selling. In so doing, they shape social perceptions that multiracials exist as such. Through the marketplace, multiracials are being constituted as subjects. Given the abundance of marketing—its scope and reach—we cannot afford to ignore its impact on the racialization of groups.

## ■ Notes

1. I use the term "multiracial" to refer to a broad range of people, including those who identify or are identified by others as being of "racially mixed" ancestry, as well as to intermarried couples.

2. Market segmentation was first theorized in the late 1950s. It arose as a solution to marketers' concerns that in the aftermath of Americans' postwar purchasing frenzy, markets for various consumer goods were becoming saturated and profits could no longer be ensured. By identifying differences in the tastes and habits of consumers, marketers could appeal to those differences and stimulate demand. See Cohen (2003) for a history of market segmentation.

3. In her analysis of marketing to children, Susan Linn describes how marketers use the rationale of need to justify the creation and marketing of television programs to infants. The creators of *Teletubbies*, for example, argued that their show would reach an "underserved" market. The term "underserved," Linn points out, is "usually associated with people needing and not getting adequate health care and social services" (2004: 56). Infants' putative "need" to have programming directed at them is said to come out of their specific developmental stage of life. That almost



all infants go through these developmental stages constitutes them as a class and therefore a market.

4. A friend who saw a similar "spotlight" in *Lucky* first made me aware of *Curls*. *Lucky* is a magazine dedicated to shopping.

5. All hair is made up of the same substance. What distinguishes hair textures among people (not just women) is the shape of the hair follicle.

6. In American literature, themes of interracialism have been explored for over two centuries. A recent spate of popular films like *Far from Heaven* (2002), *Die Another Day* (2002), and *Save the Last Dance* (2001) have featured interracial couples (Jones 2002). In contrast, before the late 1990s, multiracials as such had been almost totally absent from advertising.

7. The list of these characterizations is extensive. In the 1920s, Marcus Garvey was particularly hostile to what he called the "traitorous mulatto leadership" of Negroes, and eugenicist Madison Grant wrote in *The Passing of the Great Race* (1921) that mixing between blacks and inferior immigrant groups produced an inferior, lower type. More recently, Japanese American leaders, responding to high rates of outmarriage in the 1990s, expressed concern that their community would "die out," and Molefi Asante, chair of African American studies at Temple University, stated that multiracial classification "could be very, very useful, because there is a need to define who is in and who is not. . . . In fact, I think we should go further than that—identify those people who are in interracial marriages" (Wright 1994).

8. Esprit and Cherokee are two other clothing companies that began featuring interracial casts, but unlike Benetton, their ads focused on interracial friendship rather than interracial intimacy.

9. For photos of Colored Francie and a collector's assessment of her value today, see <http://kattisdolls.crosswinds.net/faces/cousins.htm>.

10. Holt states that the child workers in Indonesia who make Nike shoes earn roughly two dollars for an eleven-hour workday (2000: 110).

11. Nike paid Jordan \$20 million annually—"more than the total annual wages earned by Indonesian workers who made the shoe" (Holt 2000: 110).

12. Gatorade's campaign with Jordan popularized a jingle with the refrain, "If I could be like Mike."

13. There are many competing analyses of the consequences of multiracial recognition for racial politics. Most center on the effects of state enumeration. Critics of such enumeration include Spencer 1997.

14. My evidence for this claim is anecdotal at present. During a rather serendipitous trip to a bookstore in Manhattan, a casting agent approached my niece and me because she wanted to use us in an ad for a linen company. When I asked her to describe the casting call (and told her of my academic interest in the subject), she rather sheepishly confessed that she was told to go out and find "white-looking black women" with their kids. If she finds a person she wants to photograph and it turns out they are part of an interracial family, she said, she has to refuse them. Such images, she surmised, do not fit the family image the company is after. In this ironic example, the company sought an image of racial mixedness ("white-looking black women") as a representation of African American families. Racial mixedness is desired as long as the social context of that mixedness (racially different parents, the family) is invisible. Apparently, company executives thought "black-looking black women" unsuitable representatives of African American families. An image of racial mixedness is employed to cultivate the sense that the company is sensitive to diversity without offending anyone. According to my contacts in an ad firm for a major beer company, company executives insisted on changes to one ad featuring a black man and white woman in an intimate setting. These marketers believe the

company executives did so because they were not personally comfortable with the intimacy displayed between the characters.

15. Arlene Davila (2001) contends that the image of the Hispanic consumer invoked by US advertising firms draws from dominant ideas constructed by Latin-American intellectuals about the distinctive nature of Latin American culture—one constructed in contrast to the United States. In this formulation Latin American is to family, religion, and tradition as the United States is to technological innovation, materialism, and a lack of culture.

16. The best (and certainly the funniest) distillation of the public's desire to consume mixed-race bodies is, in my opinion, comedian Dave Chapelle's "Racial Draft" sketch (Chapelle's Show, Comedy Central, 2004). In it, various famous mixed-race people are "drafted" by representatives of racial groups in a forum modeled on professional sports' drafts. "The Jews" take Lenny Kravitz, whereas Tiger is drafted by "the blacks," much to the Asian delegation's annoyance. They draft the black rap group Wu Tang Clan.

17. Ethnic marketing companies are unhappy about this development because of its potential to take business away from them.

18. According to a Barbie spokesman, Kayla, Madison, and Chelsea (Barbie's new friends) are designed to look ambiguous so as to appeal to little girls of a broad range of ethnicities (Walker 2003).

19. Says one marketing analyst, "By the time the next Census comes around, multiracials may not look like such strange creatures anymore and marketers may by then have found the appropriate visual language to address them directly" (author not listed, Marketing Trendz newsletter, June 6, 2003).

# Mixed Messages

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Multiracial Identities  
in the "Color-Blind" Era

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edited by David L. Brunsma



BOULDER  
LONDON