Race in Commodity Exchange and Consumption: Separate but Equal

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The movement of blacks from the status of a slave to that of a consumer had tremendous social and geographic consequences. Slaves were not possessors of money and did not engage in the commodity circuit. Emancipation elevated blacks to wage laborers and consumers. The commodity circuit produced social relations that were problematic for race relations in the postbellum South. The geographical and social solution to this problem was neither integration nor exclusion of blacks from the commodity circuit, but segregation. While the model of consumption may be white, the way of capitalism is not to deny anyone access to the commodity circuit. Exclusion would have provided too rigid a boundary for the commodity circuit. The Plessy decision satisfied the structural imperative of capital to expand consumption while also retaining race as a social marker. It provided for the right amount of inclusion and exclusion in the commodity circuit, reducing just enough of the racial obstacle to expand the sphere of consumption to include the former slaves. Key Words: segregation, commodity exchange, consumption, postbellum South, race.

A truly free people possess the power to produce, as well as to consume.
—(Weems 1998)

This article examines race in commodity exchange and consumption. Expanding the sphere of exchange and consumption is a structural imperative of capital, which Marx and Engels (1967) welcomed as a historically progressive form that could create liberating possibilities for the working class—the “immense majority.” More recently, Hardt and Negri (2000) explain how the globalization of capital has produced the “empire” without boundaries that makes possible more than ever an immense majority, what they call the “multitude.” How did this liberating possibility of capital play out in the sphere of exchange and consumption and against the postbellum South's policy of racial segregation? Race-connected practices take different “shape, size, contours, purpose, function—with changes in the economy, the social structure, the system and, above all the challenges, the resistance to that system” (Sivanandan 1983, 2). What were the social and geographical effects of blacks moving from status of slaves to that of free laborers and members of the buying public—a viable consumer market—in the postbellum South? As a historically and geographically specific construct, race has often been overlooked in studies of exchange and consumption (Miller et al. 1998).

The fordist regime is identified most with mass production and consumption. It tied workers’ consumption to production, socializing the masses not only as labor power, but also as consumption power (Gramsci 1971; Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 159–61; Brenner and Glick 1991; Bocock 1993). Although in the United States, the regime did not emerge fully until the end of the Great Depression, its roots extend back well before the twentieth century when mass consumption reached a mature form (Knudsen, Koh, and Boggs 1997, 374). In late nineteenth-century Boston, Edward Bellamy (1887/1951, 257, 258) observed many features of this mass consumption.

I reached Washington Street at the busiest point. . . . Stores! stores! stores! miles of stores! ten thousand stores to distribute the goods needed by this one city. . . . I took wondering note of the show windows of the stores, filled with goods arranged with a wealth of pains and artistic devices to attract the eye. I saw the throngs of ladies looking in, and the proprietors eagerly watching the effect of the bait. I went within and noted the hawk-eyed floor-walker watching for business, overlooking the clerks, keeping them up to their task of inducing the customers to buy, buy, buy, for money if they had it, for credit if they had it not, to buy what they wanted not, more than they wanted, what they could not afford. . . . Why this effort to induce people to buy?

This “effort to induce people to buy” is a structural imperative of capital, which normally achieves expansion through the extension of consumer markets across new geographical regions—a spatial fix—but also, by their extension into new social spaces, a radical form of...
vertical expansion within existing markets (Lee 1993, 73, 77, 123).

With vertical expansion of markets came national chain stores and department stores that employed “compelling visual dramas within which mass-produced goods played starring roles.” As early as the mid-nineteenth century, cities became “sites for massive, imposing structures of consumption.” The department store was both a site for consumption and a sight of consumption, changing mere merchandise into spectacular commodity signs (Ewen and Ewen 1992, 44). It symbolized the shift from a production-oriented society to one centered increasingly on consumption (Laermans 1993). With a national mass production and distribution system making more goods available in remote areas, the late nineteenth century was also a turning point in the development of the southern market for goods (Ownby 1999). Organized in 1889, Loveman’s department store of Birmingham claimed to be one of the largest stores south of the Ohio River with forty-two separate departments and reaching sales of more than $1.5 million by 1908 (Loveman File).

In the postbellum South, trouble developed when former slaves could accumulate money and assume symbols of upward mobility (K. Clark 1965, 22). The vertical expansion of the market meant contact between blacks and whites in both private allocation of commodities—individual consumption—and public allocation of commodities—collective consumption. Places of consumption within growing towns and cities of the postbellum South became places of racial mixing. Blacks had more contact with whites in the country stores than at the workplace, courthouse, or polling place, schools, and churches (Hale 1999; Satterthwaite 2001, 78–82). According to Edgar Thompson (1989, 16),

Local churches were divided racially as well as denominationally, and they were used, ordinarily, only one day in the week. Schools were racially segregated and used only seasonally and for limited times during the day and the week. Courthouses were few and far between, and none of these played an important community wide integrating role. So the full force of the community’s population could and did focus on the store, which was opened for business every day, except Sunday, throughout the year. Blacks and whites in the postbellum South more nearly approached equality in the store than anywhere else. . . . There was an air of familiarity and tolerance at the store rarely matched elsewhere.

In his book on Mississippi consumer culture from 1830 to 1998, Ted Ownby (1999, 72) found that in the postbellum country store, black customers did not even face “different prices or interest rates than whites.” Since the earliest trading in Mesopotamia, shopping has had a strain of democratization. All are seen as potential customers. In fact, national chain stores were associated with equal rights: “The chains came along with a standard service for all customers” (quoted in Weems 1998, 18). According to Satterthwaite (2001, 6), “This intrinsic social leveling has permeated every aspect of shopping in the United States.” The abolition of slavery weakened whites’ claims to superiority, but the former slave as a possessor of money engaging in the sphere of exchange and consumption further weakened claims of white supremacy. Power relations in exchange and consumption were not visible enough to demonstrate white supremacy and remind former slaves of their marginal status.

One of the prime mechanisms that makes the endless accumulation of capital possible is the commodification of everything. Commodification eliminates traces of differences and of human agency for everything is saleable and purchasable. For the impact of commodification on local culture, we only need to note Marx and Engels’s (1967) famous comments in the Communist Manifesto,

In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. (83)

They go on to say that commodification produces

The heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners [the others] to capitulate. (84)

How did this tendency for capitalism to batter down social barriers play out against the postbellum racial fear of physical proximity and racial contamination?

As free laborers, blacks could also engage in the commodity and consumption circuit. But as Glickman (1999, 3) writes, just “as the purchase of goods was being acclaimed as a key to American identity and citizenship, the business practices of ‘red lining’ (keeping stores away from minority neighborhoods) and of making products and services unavailable to blacks served to exclude racial minorities from consumption.” Blacks were given an identity through what Foucault called “dividing practices,” a mode of manipulation involving the practice of exclusion, as Rabinow (1984, 8) puts it. America’s race-connected practices, however, did not take the form of exclusion from exchange and consumption. Blacks could engage in the commodity circuit as long they accepted the rules of racial segregation like those found in Birmingham (Table 1). Segregation did not prevent blacks
from engaging in the commodity and consumption circuit and their public display of consumer goods, but it did provide capital the spatial fix needed to remind blacks of their marginal status in both individual and collective consumption.

Power Relations in Exchange and Consumption

That which I am unable to do as a man, and of which therefore all my individual essential powers are incapable, I am able to do by means of money. Money thus turns each of these powers into something which in itself it is not—turns it, that is, into its contrary... servant into master, master into servant.

—(Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844)

For Marx (1977, 247–57), capital was money in motion, and for one to consume, a number of exchanges must occur. These exchanges comprise two distinct circuits: the production and consumption circuits. The two circuits can be represented in the following way: M–C–M and C–M–C, where M denotes money and C, commodity (Marx 1970). In the first circuit, the circuit of production, money is capital, a factor of production. The commodity serves as the means to accumulate capital that purchases the means (materials and labor) to produce commodities that are then exchanged for more capital. This process makes possible the endless circulation and accumulation of capital—the exchange of money for commodity to make more money. The accumulation of money as capital is the primary objective.

The second circuit, C–M–C, represents the circulation through which every commodity passes to become “a direct use-value for its owner,” the sphere of consumption. In consumption, money serves as a means, that is, income, to purchase commodities; it is a medium of exchange. The usefulness of a commodity has the unique property of creating exchange value. Having arrived at a situation in which the commodity can serve as a use-value, it falls out of the circuit of exchange into the sphere of consumption (Marx 1977, 198). Two commodities may have the same exchange value, but dissimilar use-values. As Marx (1970, 27) saw it, even the “[o]ne and the same use-value can be used in various ways.” Use-value serves social needs and wants that may have little or no relation to the price of the commodity. Once the commodity achieves its primary purpose of exchange, it passes over into a different domain of everyday life where it is recontextualized into the material and symbolic object of lived experience. Commodities are never complete; they are forever being recontextualized in the process of being consumed. Although producers usually get the credit, consumers add use-value to the commodity as well (Lee 1993, 25; Twitchell 1999, 45). This recontextualization occurs through the process of “bricolage,” a term taken from the work of Levi-Strauss (1966, 17, 21; 1973). The “bricoleur” speaks with and through the medium of things, making use of whatever commodity is at hand to communicate meaning that can shape collective identity. Through both private and public allocation of use-value, former slaves, individually and collectively, sought to reshape their identities.

In exchange and consumption, a powerful counter-tendency exists to diminish racial and status divisions. The absolute objectivity with which money transactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ordinance</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>968</td>
<td>Unlawful for a black and white person to play with each other at game of chance.</td>
<td>1905</td>
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<td>289</td>
<td>Separate accommodation for whites and blacks on streetcars.</td>
<td>1910</td>
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<td>308</td>
<td>Moving pictures of any prize fight between a white man and Negro prohibited.</td>
<td>1910</td>
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<td>38-C</td>
<td>Segregated Cemetery.</td>
<td>1911</td>
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<td>1075</td>
<td>Nurses not to take white children into Negro homes.</td>
<td>1917</td>
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<td>1130</td>
<td>Segregated blacks and whites in restaurants.</td>
<td>1917</td>
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<tr>
<td>1101-C</td>
<td>Racial segregation of residential areas.</td>
<td>1926</td>
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<td>5066</td>
<td>Provided for segregated recreation facilities.</td>
<td>1930</td>
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<td>5516</td>
<td>Separate accommodations in public buildings.</td>
<td>1930</td>
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<td>5210,5212</td>
<td>Employer required to provide separate toilet facilities for white and black workers.</td>
<td>1930</td>
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<td>1413</td>
<td>Separate accommodations for whites and blacks on any jitney, bus or taxicab.</td>
<td>1944</td>
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<tr>
<td>798-F</td>
<td>Black and white persons not to play together or in company with each other in checkers, baseball, football, basketball or similar games.</td>
<td>1950</td>
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operate in the commodity circuit recognizes no a priori differences among individuals. Money, as a medium of exchange within the commodity circuit, occurs without regard to the characteristics of the individual. It is a disembedded mechanism that removes any intrinsic differences of persons from the circuit. Simmel (1978, 343) explains that the possession of money develops "the tendency and feeling of independent importance in relation to the social whole." He goes on to say,

The objectivity of human interaction . . . finds its highest expression in purely monetary economic interests. Whatever is sold for money goes to the buyer who offers most for it, quite regardless of what or who he is. Where other equivalents play a role, where a possession is given away for reasons of honour, or gratitude, then the character of the person who receives it is taken into consideration. Conversely, whenever I buy for money's sake, it is irrelevant from whom I buy what I want as long as it is worth its price.

—(ibid., 436)

Miller (1987, 73, emphasis added) also notes that money transaction allows for exchange outside of the nexus of personal social relations. . . . Money . . . tends to extend a concept of equality, in so far as the perception of inequality becomes based upon differences in the possession of money rather than on an essentialist notion of intrinsic differences in persons.

The abstract medium through which goods are exchanged for money can suppress social differences. This medium designates to all consumers a status in which they are effectively treated as qualitatively equal and different only in respective quantities of money possessed. For as soon as laborers exploited in the sphere of production receive their cash wages, they are "set upon by [that] other portion of the bourgeoisie" in the sphere of exchange and consumption to buy, buy, buy (Marx and Engels 1967, 88). The lifestyles of former slaves could be determined to a large extent by what they could afford, by money. The effect of once being a black slave—its powerlessness—could be nullified by money, which has the power to transform the incapacities of being a former slave into their contraries. The former slave becomes the master of his being and "a simple entry of circulation" of capital (Marx 1964, 167; Marx 1969, 420–21). As consumers and possessors of exchange value, that is, money, blacks and whites can represent the same homogeneous group in which the individual characteristics of the consumer are obliterated; in exchange and consumption, "everyone's cash is presumed to have the same purchasing power (for commodities and social respect) in a way that is not the case with labor and earning power in the sphere of production" (Fiske 1994, 470).

In the production circuit, power relations were clearer and less of a problem for maintaining racial divisions. Power relations were visible enough to demonstrate white supremacy—more visible than those in exchange and consumption (Delaney 1998). Preteceille and Terrail (1985, 60) explain that in the sphere of exchange and consumption, wage-earners and employers appear as equally free and juridically equal subjects, exchanging equal value for equal value. But in the process of production, unequal exchange and relationship of exploitation prevail. There the labour force has value only as an exploitable object.

Relations within the sphere of exchange and consumption were problematic for race relations in America. Consumption as hybrid, involving white and black consumers, was particularly problematic for the postbellum South. The need of the postbellum South to retain as much as possible the racial barrier that slavery built contradicted the tendency for capital to break down barriers in commodity exchange and consumption. The sphere of exchange and consumption dictates a certain kind of relationship for those involved in it, and this had significance for the biracial postbellum South (Thompson 1989, 16). America's policy of segregation effected a balance between exclusion and assimilation that allowed former slaves to engage in the sphere of exchange and consumption, a central component of the capitalist economy.

The South

Relations of exploitation were most visible in the slave mode of production. In the antebellum South, the plantation bourgeoisie created a peculiar contradiction with respect to the free flow of capital by reducing plantation laborers to bondage. The plantation was an integral part of capitalism without being based on free wage labor (Allen 1997, 97; Wilson 2000, 44–45). Nevertheless, some slave owners did allow, and sometimes encouraged, slaves to earn and spend small amounts of money (Owby 1999, 50–60). On the plantation, slaves made money by selling products from their own gardens or cotton patches to their owners. Between 5 and 10 percent of slaves in the South also could be expected to be hired out during the year. Genovese (1974, 392) notes that some could even "hire their own time," that is, make their own arrangements. These were highly skilled slaves who surrendered a large part of the wages earned to their masters, but, with the
remainder, hundreds were able to accumulate and save money. Skilled slaves, such as those in New Orleans, lived a richer social life than their counterparts on the plantation. They made purchases based on a variety of criteria—style, appearance, etc.—and were able to undermine, somewhat, the appearance created by the slave owners' practice of handing out the same clothes to every slave. In New Orleans, Blassingame (1973, 3) notes, for instance, that some

were even allowed to hold balls in their masters' house. Lavishly dressed, the bondsmen frequently ate cakes, fruits, and candies and drank freely of wines and liquors at dances, where they performed the bamboula and the polka to drums and violins played by slave musicians.

Slave owners saw no problem in allowing slaves to make money and spend it in this way (Ownby 1999, 50–60). Consumption for the sake of consumption was considered gratification of one's "own private vanity and folly," and not for production (A. Smith 1776/1976, 803). Consumption was not rooted in utility, but in the need for social attention—the need to conceal despair. Adam Smith (1759/1976, 180) asked,

How many people ruin themselves by laying out money on trinkets of frivolous utility? What pleases these lovers of toys is not so much the utility, as the aptness of the machines which are fitted to promote it. . . . They walk about loaded with a multitude of baubles, . . . some of which may sometimes be of some little use, but all of which might at all times be very well spared, and of which the whole utility is certainly not worth the fatigue of bearing the burden.

Persons who engage in such gratification are "unproductive." In its original usage, to consume was an act of pillage, to devour, waste, spend—a meaning expressed in the old term for tuberculosis, consumption (Ewen and Ewen 1992, 31). For the slave owner, buying goods for pleasure was one of the many weaknesses of character that marked slaves as needing supervision.

Granted that some slaves possessed money, the process of selling goods to slaves, and expecting payment for those goods must be viewed within the system of slavery and not as a challenge to it. Not only did the master have power to extract surplus from the slave, but the rights of the slave to possess money and engage in the sphere of exchange and consumption also were transferred to the master by way of his possession of the slave as property. Therefore, anything that the slave might have purchased belonged to the slave owner, who benefited from the part the slave was taking in the consumer economy (Ownby 1999, 50–60). Use-values produced by slaves are themselves properties of the master (Lebowitz 2003, 146–47).

Most slaves, however, with little or no access to the marketplace, depended on the plantation owners for their needs. Slaves generally were not possessors of money and did not participate in the market. They had no position in the market and little or no chance of procuring goods or services on the market for themselves. Instead, slaves were consumed as commodities, "the marketplace was a sphere most slaves could enter most easily as commodities rather than as purchasers of commodities" (Chin 2001, 35, 37, 39). They were not free to possess anything outright. Only after emancipation did they have this right. Emancipation de-commodified the black body, elevating former slaves to wage laborers and consumers (Hale 1999, 229).

Whereas race was used to segregate both the workplace and the sphere of commodity exchange and consumption, existing power relations in the workplace made it easier to maintain the inferior racial status of blacks than did relations in exchange and consumption where blacks increasingly made up a large share of the possible mass consumer market. In a description of power relations in the sphere of production, Marx (1977, 165) wrote,

The one who came to the market as the owner of money leaves it striding forward as a capitalist; the one who came to the market as the owner of labor power, brings up the rear as a worker. One of them, self-important, self satisfied, with a keen eye to business; the other, timid, reluctant, like a man who is bringing his own skin to market, and has nothing to expect but a tanning.

Capital used this power relation with workers to maintain and reinforce racial distinction in production. Lloyd Harper, who moved to Birmingham in 1946 and worked at American Cast Iron and Pipe Company, told of how the company used this power relation:

[C]rushing the black man, keeping him down, and still you were doing the work. They would bring a white man in one day. At that time I was oiling. They would bring a white man in and say, just hired, and say, "Lloyd, this fellow here was hired today. We want you to show him the work." But he's my boss. I had to show him the work, and he was my boss.

—(Harper 2004, 54)

Wood (1995, 266), however, notes that even in the sphere of production there is a tendency in capitalism to reduce workers to interchangeable units of labor, which has the effect of undermining differences within the working class, to dilute identity like race. But using its
power over labor, capital induced white labor “to prefer poverty to equality with the Negro . . . would have low wages upon which they could eke out an existence than see colored labor with a decent wage” (Du Bois 1964, 680). Power relations within production were made possible at a time when race was fixed according to a biological rationale, and a rigid racial division of labor restricted the vast majority of blacks to a few occupations. The white working class remained structurally distinct from the black working class. Whites would not object to having contact with blacks in a relationship of employer and employee. Asked in 1883 by the U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor (1885, 165) about race relations in the workplace, the former president of an iron company in Alabama made it known that within the realm of leisure and consumption, if “asked to sit down at a table with a Negro he would have considered it a gross insult, but did not feel at all insulted at being asked to work with him in the field . . . no objection to associating with the colored race as laborers.”

K. Clark (1965, 22) explains:

It is not the sitting next to a Negro at a table or washing at the next basin that is repulsive to a white, but the fact that this implies equal [social] status. Historically, the most intimate relationships have been approved between Negro and white so long as status of white superiority versus Negro inferiority has been clear.

Close proximity of blacks to whites was accepted as long as blacks understood that they were of lower social status than whites. The vertical pattern of dominance within the mode of production was quite sufficient to demonstrate white supremacy, guaranteeing the security of whites.

As the nouveau segment of the working class, former slaves were free to engage in both the production and consumption circuits—to sell their labor as a commodity to procure goods on the market for themselves. But low wages and postbellum methods of payment kept most blacks on the margin of the consumer society. The method of payment under sharecropping made it difficult for croppers “to develop an air of intrigue about goods” when the landowner only issued them what they wanted them to have. The payment method prevented them “from enjoying a sense of freedom in shopping, since they could not be certain how much they were paying for goods when they received them as advances on a future crop” (Ownby 1999, 71). The combination of merchant and planter in the postbellum South launched a system of usury unrivaled by any in history (Bond 1969, 121). Interest on consumer loans to tenant farmers ranged from 50 to 125 percent, with some landlord-merchants charging tenant farmers a flat rate of 25 percent despite the length of the loan, at a time when short-term interest rates in New York ranged from 4 percent to 6 percent and never exceeded 8 percent (Woodward 1951, 180; Dollard 1957, 140; T. Clark and Kirwan 1967, 90–91; Ransom and Sutch 1977, 130). The sharecropping arrangement left croppers with little cash to purchase discretionary consumer goods. They had to spend a greater percentage of their scarce cash on food because landowners allowed them few opportunities to grow their food (Ownby 1999, 106).

The number of southerners who worked for cash outside agriculture began to increase during the 1880s. In Mississippi the number of persons earning wages increased from 5,827 in 1880 to 57,560 by 1920 (Ownby 1999, 82, 83). Later, the New Deal’s agriculture policy effectively made for an “enclosure” movement that forced more tenant farmers off the land to work as wage laborers in towns and cities (Woods 1998; Wilson 2000). Working outside old constraints of planter domination, blacks had more opportunities to assert themselves in the sphere of consumption.

Blacks’ Assertiveness in Consumption

Before slavery had ended, Frederick Douglass saw what was possible if blacks were free to engage in the sphere of exchange and consumption. In his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845), Douglass depicted his journey from slavery to freedom in the North, which he referred to as a Canaan offering physical and spiritual salvation from the degradation of slavery. The North, however, did not conform totally to his idea of the Promised Land:

I was quite disappointed at the general appearance of things in New Bedford. The impression which I had received respecting the character and condition of the people of the North, I found to be singularly erroneous. I had very strangely supposed, while in slavery, that few of the comforts, and scarcely any of the luxuries, of life were enjoyed at the north, compared with what were enjoyed by the slaveholders of the south. I probably came to this conclusion from the fact that northern people owned no slaves. I supposed that they were about upon a level with the non-slaveholding population of the south. I knew they were exceedingly poor, and I had been accustomed to regard their poverty as the necessary consequence of their being non-slaveholders. I had somehow imbibed the opinion that, in the absence of slaves, there could be no wealth, and very little refinement.

—(Douglass 1845, 110)
What Douglass observed in New Bedford, Massachusetts, was a “direct link between a free laboring class and material prosperity” (Pedersen 1991, 194, 195). Douglass (1845, 112) found former slaves who “had not been seven years out of their chains, living in finer houses, and evidently enjoying more of the comforts of life, than the average of slaveholders in Maryland.” He saw what was possible if blacks were free to work and consume, free to indulge, if they so wished, in exchange and consumption. Douglass helped to organize the National Colored Labor Union for newly emancipated black workers, knowing that, as free workers, blacks could exchange money for goods, purchasing and utilizing, if not as much, the same products as whites.

With little hope of owning land in the postbellum South, blacks left the farms for new—albeit unsteady—employment in towns and cities, receiving money outside the old constraints of planter domination (Ownby 1999, 82, 83, 107). Instead of producing solely for export as slaves, free blacks could earn enough to consume above that necessary for the reproduction of labor, which encouraged them to reject the behavior and appearances their former masters and postbellum landlords had come to expect of them (Du Bois 1964, 75; Ownby 1999, 124). The slave mode of production was a highly disciplinary regime. But, free to engage in the circuit of commodity exchange and consumption, former slaves did not abide by the old standard of passive behavior. They created new social geographies by moving and crossing the rigid boundary drawn by slavery. This refusal to abide by the old disciplinary regime appeared in a wide variety of guises and daily practices. Former slaves sought equality by speaking with and through consumption. They sought to prove that they possessed leisure time and the freedom to absent themselves from work if they so wished. As slaves, blacks ran away to create their own spaces—a “rival geography”—for rest and amusement (Camp 2004, 6, 7). Free time was critical because it was not only time for reproducing labor power but also time for developing the human capacity (Lebowitz 2003, 147). As persons free to engage in the commodity circuit, former slaves attempted to take control over their more flexible work lives. The black body—constructed totally as an instrument of labor under slavery—was reconstructed and celebrated as an instrument of pleasure by former slaves (Kelley 1993, 85). According to Ransom and Sutch (1977, 6), former slaves emulated the work-leisure patterns of white workers, exchanging a fraction of their potential income for “free” time. . . .

Adolescents in their early teens, women with children, and elderly men and women all worked significantly fewer hours per day and fewer days per year than had been the standard under the oppression of slavery. Even the adult men chose to work less.

Ransom and Sutch contend that, after emancipation, the hours worked per capita by ex-slaves declined overall by 28 to 37 percent. Free time for former slaves, however, meant less time for their former masters. Absence from work, which generally was defined within the circulation of capital as laziness, was a major source of contention for southern capitalists, who often blamed the under-development of the postbellum South on the laziness of former slaves and their failure to work as under slavery.

By insisting on unproductive time, former slaves were resisting, attempting to take back their bodies, to recuperate, to be together and assert their identity. The younger generation took advantage of unproductive time to shake, twist, and flaunt their overworked bodies, to drink, talk, flirt, and, in spite of occasional fights, to reinforce their sense of community. In asserting themselves in the sphere of reproduction, former slaves carved out a space under their control—new social geographies—to become self-valorizing. Kelley (1994) speaks of this assertiveness in everyday life, which can occur anywhere, as “infrapolitics,” evasive actions that can lend a political dimension to everyday practices (de Certeau 1984).

This growing sense of assertiveness inspired a great deal of apprehension among whites (Rabinowitz 1978, 333–34). In James Weldon Johnson’s fictional novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1990 [1912], 57), the narrator observed how the proudest and fairest lady in the South could with propriety—and it is what she would most likely do—go to the cabin of Aunt Mary, her cook, if Aunt Mary was sick, and minister to her comfort with her own hands; but if Mary’s daughter, Eliza, a girl who used to run round my lady’s kitchen, but who has received an education and married a prosperous young colored man, were at death’s door, my lady would no more think of crossing the threshold of Eliza’s cottage than she would of going into a bar room for a drink.

The narrator goes on to say, white people somehow feel that colored people who have education and money, who wear good clothes and live in comfortable houses, are “putting on airs,” that they do these things for the sole purpose of “spiting the white folks”. . . . I am in grave doubt as to whether the greater part of the friction in the South is caused by the whites having a natural antipathy to Negroes as a race, or an
acquired antipathy to Negroes in certain relations to themselves.

—(ibid., 58)

Whites’ apprehension of blacks as consumers also extended to places outside the South. In 1895, a New York City reporter seemed caught off-guard—curious—by what he observed in the developing “New Negro quarter” of the city:

Always and invariably on “dress parade” is the new quarter. . . . The younger women, arrayed in gowns that are wonderfully good imitations of the fashions, though heaven knows how they can afford them [emphasis mine], walk in pairs and trios up and down Seventh Avenue. . . . the negro of the “new Quarter” knows how to be comfortable. The cosiness of the living rooms is surprising. In the best of them the bed stands out in the main room, and it is flanked by bureau, table and ice chest. Gay prints adorn the walls, and curious, highly colored ornaments cover the mantle. . . . The avenue’s east side is the daily promenade of gayly dressed girls and sprig [sic] young colored men. Yellow is the prime tint of the young colored girls’ clothes. The favorite dress of the young men “in style” is a glossy silk hat, patent leathers, a black suit with a sack coat of remarkable shortness, and a figured waistcoat. Paste diamonds are dégâtur, and the linen is seldom immaculate. And as the procession of young colored people passes and repasses . . . the Hebrews across the street stand out in front of their shops and impress the “sheapness” [sic] of their goods upon everybody within earshot. The panorama never stops unrolling from eight in the morning to close upon midnight. It is a curious highway, indeed. (New York Daily Tribune 1895, 26)

The “symbolically significant circulation of mass-produced consumer goods” could not easily be controlled racially (Hale 1999, 123, 196). In the economy of mass production, many consumer objects lost their effectiveness as social markers, blurring any social distinction between the races (Hale 1999, 125). Mass merchandising made possible abundance and reduced cost that tended in the direction of equality (Bernard 1956; Ewen and Ewen 1992). With mass production, society overcame its desire for the uniqueness of every reality or object by accepting its reproduction, bringing art objects closer spatially and humanly by way of their likeness (Benjamin 1968). In 1892, Simon Patten, a strong proponent of industrial consumerism, observed, “Everywhere the homes of the poorest people are full of beautiful objects, many of which have no cost; and when their taste is improved by contact with these objects, others more suited to the new condition can be obtained at a slight increase in cost” (quoted in Ewen and Ewen 1992, 47).

The early success of department stores was partly due to this mass-produced, low-priced merchandise (Laermans 1993, 93). The mass reproduction of color paintings through chromolithographies represented a flourishing democracy of images once limited to the realm of the European upper class (Marzio 1979). It stripped these images of their upper class aura, or their use-value in a specific time and place, and put them into circulation within an exchange system that leveled all values into abstract equivalences (Benjamin 1968). Placing these same bright images against the grim backdrop of slavery, Frederick Douglass observed,

Heretofore, colored Americans have thought little of adorning their parlors with pictures. . . . Pictures come not with slavery and oppression and destitution but with liberty, fair play, leisure, and refinement. These conditions are now possible to colored American citizens, and I think the walls of their houses will soon begin to bear evidence of their altered relations to the people about them. (quoted in Marzio 1979, 104, emphasis added)

As the process of buying and selling rapidly produced a consumer culture, mass-produced commodities were associated increasingly with certain meanings (Laermans 1993, 94). Modern capitalism transformed mass-produced objects into readily available “symbolic goods” that former slaves could use to display their desired status or identity. For Frederick Douglass, the spread of chromos was a tangible symbol of “the transcendence of oppression. Coming out of the harsh and undaunted experience of slavery, he interpreted the dispersal of beautiful images as proof of concrete, material improvement of social conditions” (quoted in Marzio 1979, 104). Former slaves could be equal to whites before objects as use- and sign value. Not only could former slaves accumulate enough money to purchase and use the same products as whites, but in their leisure time, they could also experience the aesthetic use-value of commodities. Whereas the use-value of a commodity serves social needs and exists within a social framework, it does “not express the social relations of production” (Marx 1970, 28) nor the racial status quo. Once the commodity falls outside the sphere of exchange into the sphere of consumption, its symbolic value may undermine the racial status quo. The symbolic value of a commodity could be used by blacks to pursue needs above those dictated by their former status as slaves.

Although power relations in the sphere of production relegated blacks to the lowest occupations, collectively, their earning power was significant and increased over
time. As early as 1868, one white Mississippian admitted, “The negroes . . . keep a large amount of money in circulation in the country, and consume on a much larger scale than formerly, which makes the business of supplying them as lucrative, if not more so, than planting or renting” (quoted in J. Walker 1998, 160–161). Du Bois (1931b, 315, 318) developed a tremendous faith in accomplish” (quoted in J. Walker 1998, 160–161). Du Bois (1931b, 315, 318) developed a tremendous faith in the potential liberating possibilities of American capitalism to uplift the race:

American wealth [capitalism] has helped the American Negro and that without this help the Negro could not have attained his present advancement. . . . Big industry in the last 10 years has opened occupations for a million Negro workers, without which we would have starved in jails and gutters.

Du Bois (1931a) also argued that it was not true that the economic cycle begins with production; rather, it begins with consumption, “with the person who is buying Things and Services.” And knowing full well that America would transform workers into consumers, Du Bois (1940, 208) predicted the rise and importance of exchange and consumption for blacks: “In the future reorganization of industry the consumer as against the producer is going to become the key man. Industry is going to be guided according to his wants and needs and not exclusively with regard to the profit of the producers and transporters.” The “Negro” as consumer could approach economic equality with whites much more nearly than he ever would as a producer (Du Bois 1940, 208; see also Du Bois 1903). The growing availability and inherent democracy of exchange and consumption undermined the superior social status of whites (Cohen 2003, 42).

In the minds of white southerners, whose thoughts were very much continuous with the antebellum past (Cash 1941), the consuming “Negro” as a possessor of money—a simple entry of circulation of capital—could potentially unhinge race and status identities (Hale 1999, 157). The unwillingness of the producer (capital), who depended upon the consumer, to erect rigid barriers to blacks engaging in the sphere of exchange and consumption was the weak link in any radical policy of racial exclusion. As opposed to reinforcing social boundaries, the market increasingly cut across them (Ownby 1999, 97). The entrance of former slaves into the sphere of commodity exchange and consumption implied equal social status that was unacceptable to whites, particularly in the postbellum South. Blacks' assertiveness in the sphere of consumption fed extreme violence on the part of radical racist whites. In the movie “Rosewood,” the poor white residents of Sumner resulted in the prosperous and more independent and self-reliant black community of Rosewood, “a black town in a white place in a white time” (D’Orso 1996, 3). In part, this resentment fed the racial violence that destroyed the fictional town. Whites' apprehension to black consumption persisted well into the twentieth century. E. Franklin Frazier (1962 [1957]) explained how whites were often surprised at the wardrobes of their black colleagues, wardrobes that they themselves may not be able to afford. In the legalized landscape of segregation, the appearance of blacks could even be the difference between being found guilty or not guilty. Wilhelmina Griffin Jones of Tuskegee, Alabama spoke of her 1942 court experience following an encounter with a white police officer:

When my friend came back with me on Monday he came dressed for the occasion. He had on overalls with one suspender hanging to the side, and a cap with the bill turned in the back, . . . some old dusty shoes without strings and his sleeves rolled up, that sort of thing, collar open. He did this because he felt like doing this kind of thing would certainly make him [the judge] more lenient, which he was. He would have charged us with a whole lot more if he [Wilhelmina’s friend] didn’t act the way he wanted him to react you see. . . . I was well dressed, and as I talked to him [the judge] I didn’t change my language at all. He wasn’t very pleased with me at all, but he was very pleased with my friend because of the way he reacted and the way he had come dressed and that sort of thing. (Jones 2001, 275)

From slavery to long after emancipation, whites expected blacks not only to be inferior, but also appear inferior. Williamson (1984, 254) suggests that southern ruling elites supported a policy of segregation to protect blacks from radical racist whites who resented blacks' assertiveness in the sphere of reproduction. The sight of a well-dressed black in the postbellum era was deemed inappropriate or, at best, was viewed in a curious manner. Whites meeting blacks as consumers experienced the “shock of sameness,” a loss of difference (Hale 1999). One way that blacks rebelled against those expectations was to purchase, display, and enjoy goods (Ownby 1999, 5). The black worker as possessor of money could erase the appearance of status differences, creating in Chin's (2001, 33) view, “spaces and situation where 'specificity as a worker is extinguished.'”

While the postbellum South preferred and saw to it that blacks did not have a decent wage, money as a maker of social distinction in the sphere of exchange and consumption still did not provide enough of a visual demonstration of white supremacy. At the close of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, America strongly rejected hybridity in the
sphere of exchange and consumption. The educated, cultured, and refined “colored” persons, including Du Bois’s (1903) “Talented Tenth,” would find no equality in the consumer society. Persistent stereotypes reinforced the impression among whites that blacks were biologically inferior to whites. Commercial advertisements portrayed blacks not as consumers but as happy servants to whites (Figure 1). The 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, designed to advance the causes of American nationalism, imperialism, and consumerism, produced exhibits that ridiculed and denigrated blacks. A prominent Midwestern flour milling firm, R. T. Davis Milling Company, persuaded Nancy Green, a fifty-seven-year-old former slave, to become a living advertisement at the fair for the company’s Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix. Green played the role of a stereotypical plantation mammy, which won the milling firm an award at the fair and became a corporate trademark that gained national acceptance as an early icon of America’s emerging culture of mass consumption (Figure 2). The Aunt Jemima image reinforced the marginalization of the economic experience of black women who historically performed domestic labor (Rio 2000).

And the stereotypes of Africans put on display in the Dahomeyan Village at the Chicago Exhibition as exemplars of “savagery” were used routinely by whites (Rydell 1999, xix–xx, xxxii–xxxiii; see also Pedersen 1991 and Manring 1998). In the minds of many whites, the black streets, like the Dahomeyan Village, were both primitive and exotic places. Harlem was a place where whites could leave their world behind for a “moral vacation” (Osofsky 1965, 185). As Taylor (2002, 16) explains, these streets provided whites with a powerful sense of foreignness. They could step in and out of these marginal spaces to enjoy the good time. The Cotton Club of Harlem drew white “slummers” who flocked to Harlem for its nightlife. Jazz—the new urban music—abetted the commodification of black female sexuality that converted the use-value of women’s bodies into exchange value, that is, prostitution. Its spatial proximity reinforced such illegal exchange (Barlow 1989, 142; Du Cille 1993, 66–74). Many of the black saloons in Birmingham, Alabama harbored prostitutes who attracted white clients. Some saloons pushed racial integration further, housing both white and black prostitutes (Harris 1977, 190). It was this symbiotic connection between

Figure 1. 1921 Cream of Wheat ad: Giddap, Uncle!

Figure 2. Aunt Jemima.
commodification and spatial containment that produced the white spatial practice of slumming. To be black was to be embodied as a “primitive fetish” object that must be both contained and consumed (Dubey 2003, 102). The spatial practice of slumming was an African safari—an “exploration into the world of difference, into the body of the Other, [it] provides a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one’s familiar racial group” (hooks 1992, 24).

Still, the power of money to transform human and natural properties into their contraries could melt into the air that which was believed to be racially and biologically solid during slavery. Although power relations in production kept most blacks on the margin of the consumer society, the traditional Marxist view of class was not a sufficient race marker; thus, there was a need for a race policy to demonstrate and make more visible white supremacy in both individual and collective consumption. The social and geographical effects of race were much more complicated than the Marxist two-class model of capitalism would have us believe (Gottdiener 1985, 169–70). The problem was that in the sphere of exchange and consumption, blacks had to be in a subordinate position; white superiority had to be reproduced continuously. As Hale (1999, 131) explains it, racial and class identities could never be attached in a way that “could make middle class blacks poorly educated and poorly spoken and thus more easily identified by whites of all classes as inferior.” The geographical and social solution was “separate but equal,” not black exclusion or separate development.

Separate but Equal

One of the rights associated with property ownership was the right to exclude. The power to exclude was one of the most valued strands in an owner’s bundle of property rights (Singer 1996, 1301). After the Civil War, this common-law rule of exclusion was adopted and extended to all businesses. The South immediately re-established black codes to retain the antebellum policy of racial exclusion. The common law of exclusion enabled businesses to serve white customers while choosing to exclude black customers who could not compel whites to serve them. Many white businesses, especially those concerned with losing white customers—fearful of contamination—exercised this right to exclude former slaves from public accommodations.

The period of Reconstruction was an attempt to guarantee blacks equal rights in public accommodations. The principle that blacks were “persons” and not “property,” with rights of access, inspired the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution and the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1875. Those businesses that held themselves out to serve the public were obligated to serve all (Singer 1996). Former slaves could patronize restaurants and hotels and sit where they wished on streetcars in the South. America “seemed to have decided that the most profitable way to operate a free market involved freeing it from the interference of racial prejudice” (Cohen 2003, 89).

The North and South eventually reached a compromise in which the North would no longer intervene in the South, ending the period of Reconstruction. Free from outside control, the South once again instituted a policy of segregation. In The Strange Career of Jim Crow (1974), C. Vann Woodward challenged the view that segregation was the immediate aftermath of Reconstruction. He argued that no abrupt changes in race relations occurred directly following Reconstruction; instead, segregation was an outgrowth of forces in the last decade of the nineteenth and first years of the twentieth century. Why this change was so long delayed reflected, according to Woodward, the “strange career of Jim Crow.” At the turn of the twentieth century, the populist movement, which consisted of an alliance of blacks, whites, farmers, and city and factory workers, shook up southern politics. Woodward (1938, 21) wrote of the period, “Never before or since have the two races in the South come so close together politically.” William Rogers (1970, 332–33) also noted that “the Populists promoted the cause of the Negroes, admitted them to their councils, advocated their political and economic advancements. To ignore these efforts is to miss an important part of the . . . movement.” The new political and economic agency of blacks, allied with populists, threatened the hegemony of the southern ruling elites, which responded by excluding blacks from voting. For Woodward, segregation was an institutional response to blacks’ potential assertiveness in the political sphere. However, whites were not only fearful of losing their distinction in the political sphere, but also losing it in the sphere of everyday life and reproduction. The fear of miscegenation was of particular concern to them.

America could have assumed the black codes excluding blacks from public accommodations, which most southern states adopted directly following the Civil War. Lawmakers also could have affirmed the right of businesses to choose their customers by abolishing the right of access for everyone, whites and blacks. Businesses could choose which race they would serve and then serve everyone of that race without discrimination. Lawmakers could limit rights of access to businesses responsible for the public allocation of use-values, or the
government could require all businesses to serve all without discrimination and in an integrated setting (Singer 1996). America elected to affirm rights of access but with an option of providing service in a segregated manner, adopted as the ruling theory in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). While the Plessy decision targeted collective consumption, it also applied to private allocations of commodities.

John W. Cell (1982, 18) argues that segregation in its early phase was closely associated with progressive forces—“cities, factories, modern politics”—allowing white supremacy to remain “at least superficially compatible” with capitalism. In the 1880s, one of the South’s principal spokespersons behind these forces was the editor of the Atlanta Constitution, Henry Grady, who spread the gospel of a “New South.” As one of the leaders of the New South movement, Grady rejected the more exclusionary race policies. A moderate on the race question, he supported the idea “that there should be equal accommodation for the two races, but separate. . . . In every theater, there should be a space set apart for the colored people, with precisely the same accommodations that are given to white people for the same price, and that the same should apply elsewhere” (quoted in Gaston 1970, 148–49). The interest of Grady and the New South movement was consistent with the class interest that Eisner (1993, 47–72) called the “market regime,” or what Roy (1991) called the “entrepreneurial class segment” of the corporate community that also favored antitrust regulation at the turn of the twentieth century. Cell (1982, 19) contends that segregation was “one of the most successful political ideologies of the past century. It was, indeed, the highest stage of white supremacy,” providing for the right amount of racial inclusion and exclusion.

The Plessy decision provided moderates like Henry Grady with the best of both worlds. It allowed for a clear distinction to be made between the same black and white customers without working against the logic of the marketplace, which is to induce all to buy. Throughout the South, the right of access to engage in individual and collective consumption could be granted to blacks, but segregation was required; Jim Crow statutes applied to railroads and streetcars (Singer 1996). The effect of Plessy was to allow former slaves to engage in the sphere of exchange and consumption in an increasingly consumer-oriented society, but without the “commingling of the two races.” The court held:

Laws permitting, and even requiring, [the separation of the races], in places where they are liable to be brought into contact, do not necessarily imply the inferiority of either race to the other, and have been generally, if not universally, recognized as within the competency of the state legislatures in the exercise of their police power.

The decision did not deprive former slaves of the right to commodity exchange and consumption; the expressed requirement of the decision was for “equal but separate” accommodations, which did not imply the inferiority of either race. Exchange and consumption were permitted upon the basis of equality for both races, which allowed capital to bring differences together. The effect was not to deny blacks the right to use, control, or dispose of their property, only to ensure that they conformed to laws regarding the separation of the races. Former slaves were excluded from voting and from certain occupations, but not from engaging in the sphere of exchange and consumption.

The way that segregation was attempted in Plessy did not violate the unity of exchange and use-value in the sphere of consumption; hence, its legal validation for most of the twentieth century. Within the consumption circuit, commodities confront one another in a dual form. The commodity is the direct unity of use-value and exchange value. It passes from the hands of those in which it has exchange value into the hands of those for which it has use-value, that is, serving as a consumer good (Marx 1970, 41, 42). Under the separate but equal doctrine, blacks could exchange money for commodities. But the acquisition and use of commodities could be manipulated temporally and spatially to enforce the notion of white supremacy. Distinctions between black and white customers in both individual and collective consumption could be made, but not enough to prevent blacks from engaging the sphere of exchange and consumption. Blacks could patronize a restaurant, department store, cinema, or park, as long as they waited until white patrons had been served. Throughout the South, blacks and whites attended the same county fairs, but on separate days. Blacks could ride the city bus as long as they sat in the back of the bus, but if the bus was crowded, they were expected, like good servants, to give up their seats to the white person standing by. On the other hand, if seats were available in the white section but not the “colored” section, blacks were expected to stand in the aisle. Blacks drank water as long as it was at the “colored only” fountains, saw the same doctor as whites, as long as they waited in the back room, waited for the bus or train as long as they waited in segregated sitting rooms at the terminals. Throughout the South, blacks entered through the back doors and basements of department stores, sat in the balconies of cinemas and the backrooms of restaurants. Segregation would be
the norm even in death (Birmingham Ordinance 38-C, Table 1).

The Plessy decision satisfied the structural need of capital to expand the sphere of consumption while providing the sociospatial structure needed to maintain the racial status quo. Segregation provided capital access to the black market without violating the racial order, making white supremacy compatible with the interest of businesses. After 1865, Singer (1996, 1390, 1398) found no court cases that affirmed “a common-law right of businesses open to the public to exclude completely on the ground of race.” Systematic exclusion of blacks from the sphere of exchange and consumption would have provided too rigid a boundary for capital. Plessy offered a basis for collaboration within the sphere of exchange and consumption that a harder and more inflexible form of racial exclusion would not allow. While railroads initially opposed segregation because of the additional cost (Roback 1986), Singer (1996, 1390, 1398) argued that white businesses generally “were willing to suffer intrusion on property in order to maintain white supremacy . . . [and] saw it as in their interests to promote segregation and were reluctant to challenge it,” and whether or not segregation maximized profits was beside the point. It was not, however, beside the point that segregation maximized profits; it was precisely the point that profits still could be earned while enforcing segregation, which was promoted as a kind of product differentiation to increase value and sales. When viewed through this economic prism, it “would be foolish to dilute such value by randomly mixing people” (R. Walker 1981, 39, emphasis added).

Separate but Equal in Housing Consumption?

Could the notion of “separate but equal” that the court validated in Plessy be expanded also to housing? While commodity exchange was not an issue in the Plessy decision, it was the core of the decision in Buchanan v. Warley (1917). Because it formed the basis of the decision, the court in Buchanan ruled residential segregation unconstitutional while not overturning the Plessy decision. The Buchanan case dealt with rights of buyers and sellers. In a land transaction, William Warley, a black man, was unwilling to accept a deed or pay for the property owned by Charles Buchanan, a white man, unless he had the right under the law to reside on the property. The use-value of a house, which is highly sensitive to externalities such as those considered obnoxious, is tied to a fixed location and cannot be moved around like most other commodities. As a fixed location, the use-value of housing confers monopoly privileges upon the owner (Harvey 1973, 158, 159). The use-value of housing includes a quantity of space for exclusive use by the occupant, a relative location, and a space that has social and symbolic status. All occupiers of housing have the same concern: to procure use-values through laying out of exchange value (Harvey 1973, 163).

For the defense in the Buchanan case, segregation was necessary because housing was indeed a fixed commodity, and as a fixed commodity, it played an important role in reproduction. Housing generates fixed relationships, and if not segregated, would create racial conflict greater than “merely the brief and temporary and almost casual association” found in schools, vehicles of public travel, restaurants, stores, etc. (quoted in Delaney 1998, 134). The defense also argued that residential segregation was not a “separate but equal” issue. Housing was privately allocated and not a publicly allocated commodity like schools and vehicles of public travel. In the private allocation of commodities, “there was neither a requirement nor a possibility of ‘equality.’” The plaintiff countered that residential segregation deprived citizens of their property and could only be permitted if housing and neighborhoods “could be equalized.” But the uniqueness of lots and neighborhoods (a fixed commodity) made them inherently unequalizable and could not be subject to segregation under the “separate but equal” race doctrine of Plessy (Delaney 1998, 134, 135).

In rendering its decision, the court did not focus on the issue of racial segregation, but more directly on one’s rights in exchange and consumption, the right to engage in the exchange of a commodity for money, to sell and buy, that is, the right of Buchanan to exchange a commodity for money and the right of Warley to purchase the commodity. As the court noted,

The case presented does not deal with an attempt to prohibit the amalgamation of the races. The right which the ordinance annulled was the civil right of a white man to dispose of his property if he saw fit to a person of color and of a colored person to make such a disposition to a white person.

The court went on to ask,

[C]an a white man be denied, consistently with due process of law, the right to dispose of his property to a purchaser by prohibiting the occupation of it for the sole reason that the purchaser is a person of color intending to occupy the premises as a place of residence?
That is, given the racial status quo, should capital be allowed to bring such differences together in housing exchange and consumption? The court answered,

"To prevent the alienation of the property in question to a person of color was not a legitimate exercise of the police power of the state, and is in direct violation of the fundamental law enacted in the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution preventing state interference with property rights except by due process of law.

Confused over why the court in Plessy could approve statutes segregating blacks and whites, but not in Buchanan, the Michigan Law Review (1917–1918) concluded, "In attempting to distinguish the residential segregation law from those allowing segregation in transportation, the court is evidently actuated by a feeling that property may be less readily subjected to restriction for the public good than liberty may be" (Constitutionality of Segregation Ordinances 1917). The right to purchase and own property cannot be restricted, but access may be restricted. Taking advantage of the confusion created by the court, New Orleans, Richmond, and Birmingham sought to maintain their racial zoning ordinances following the Buchanan decision. They argued that their racial zoning ordinances only restricted access to the property, not the purchase and ownership of the property (Harmon v. Tyler 1927; City of Richmond v. Deans 1930; Monk v. City of Birmingham 1949; City of Birmingham v. Monk 1950). And at least eight other cities, mostly in the South, also thought the same way and adopted segregation ordinances in face of the Buchanan decision (Connerly and Wilson 1992).

But such legal reasoning on the part of these cities was not consistent with what the court said. The Buchanan decision can easily be read as overturning segregation laws that deny one from fully engaging the sphere of commodity exchange and consumption. The way many cities in the South attempted housing segregation broke the unity between commodity exchange and use-value. The court not only upheld the right for one, regardless of race, to participate in the exchange of commodity for money, but also tied this right to the use of the property: "Property is more than the mere thing which a person owns. It is elementary that it includes the right to acquire, use, and dispose of it." In other words, the court saw property rights as the direct unity of use-value and exchange value, tying the right to engage in the exchange of money for a commodity to the use of the commodity. The residential segregation ordinance litigated in Buchanan violated the principle underlying the consumption circuit, C–M–C. Why purchase a house you cannot occupy and use? In the sphere of exchange and consumption, the primary objective of a purchase is the use-value of the commodity. Segregation ordinances that denied black owners right of access to their properties made the properties useless for them; that is, such properties would have no use-value for the purchaser, black or white, thereby violating the unity of exchange and use-value in the consumption circuit. In Buchanan, the segregation ordinance did not deny blacks the right to purchase a house in a white neighborhood, but it did deny right of occupancy. Adhering to the unity of exchange and use-value in the commodity circuit, the court ruled unconstitutional residential segregation in Buchanan without overturning Plessy, which better reproduced relations in the commodity exchange and consumption circuit.

Racialized Space of Individual Consumption

Not until the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954) did the U.S. Supreme Court find that “separate but equal" was not equal in education, that is, collective consumption, nor was it equal in the larger sphere of exchange and consumption, that is, individual consumption. Inequality characterized commodity exchange and consumption (N. Smith 1990), but the “separate but equal" race policy added the dimension of race. The elevation of the former slave to a possessor of money, a consumer, did not eliminate racial oppression, which became inseparable from the economy. The postbellum country store generated a great deal of contact between blacks and whites, but black customers still were identified in the store ledger as “col” [color] (Owney 1999, 75). “Separate but equal” stamped black consumers with a badge of inferiority. It provided for the spatial containment of blacks in the sphere of consumption through the signification of space: “For Colored,” “For White” (Fiske 1994, 470; Hale 1999, 157). This space, according to Kelley (1993, 102), was vigilantly undemocratic and potentially dangerous. Jim Crow signs, filthy and inoperable public toilets, white police officers, dark bodies standing in the aisles of half-empty buses, black pedestrians stepping off the sidewalk or walking with their eyes turned down or away, and other acts of interracial social “etiquette”—all reminded black people every day of their second-class citizenship.

In this racialized space of commodity exchange and consumption, black consumers could not buy substantive respect, despite their recognized importance to the economy (Figure 3).

Whenever possible, blacks tried to escape the insult and incrimination in the racialized space of exchange...
and consumption (Glickman 1999, 3–4). Automobiles purchased by blacks were "to a considerable extent personal investments designed to counteract the insult of the 'Jim Crow' [mode of public transportation]" (Du Bois 1931b, 314). The mail order catalog provided some anonymity in purchasing national brand products. Montgomery Ward and Richard Sears, founder of Sears, Roebuck, started their retail empires with mail-order catalogs. Rural free delivery (RFD) made mail-order merchandising highly successful for Montgomery Ward and Richard Sears. It provided blacks some anonymity in exchange and consumption because they did not have to travel to town to pick up mail and packages. Orders of goods could be treated without writing "col" in the margin of store ledgers and without asking blacks to go to the back door (Ownby 1999, 75). Mail-order merchandising was so successful that it eroded the market of some white merchants, who responded by appealing to racist practices. According to Ewen and Ewen (1992, 44), "Exploiting the distance anonymity of mail-order companies, local merchants peddled rumors that Sears and Ward were black men, or that Sears was a Jewish company." Sears responded by sending photos of its founders, and Ward offered a reward for the name of the person who initiated the rumor.

Beside using the mail-order catalogs, some blacks could escape insults and incrimination in the larger sphere of exchange and consumption by navigating the segregated space of shopping through resorting to what is commonly known in the black community as "passing." To "pass" as white is to dislocate one's position from the normative racial and social matrix to satisfy material needs and acquire social status. The privilege that society bestows on whiteness often motivates racial others, who are bodily able, to pass as white (Ginsberg 1996).

Those unable to navigate the racialized space of exchange and consumption by "passing" could limit their patronage to black-owned establishments. Jim Crow legislation, zoning restriction, and even violence confined most black entrepreneurs to certain sections of the city that produced the great black streets of American cities like 125th Street in Harlem, Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, Beale Street in Memphis, South Parkway in Chicago (J. H. Johnson 1989, 89). Black businesses that successfully competed against white businesses were deemed disrespectful and threatened. In 1892, a white merchant in Memphis, Tennessee, charged three black merchants who opened a store across the street with the crime of competition and sought to have the store closed. The incident precipitated a riot in which the black merchants were subsequently murdered (Schwinger 1990, 228). As Gunnar Myrdal (1944/1962, 304–305, 310) explained it,

Since the [black entrepreneurs] are excluded from the white market, it becomes important for them to hold the Negro market as a monopoly. The monopoly over the Negro market of teachers, preachers, undertakers, beautician and others is generally respected. . . . [But] These are the only Negro businesses in which Negroes are protected from white competition. In all other businesses of any consequence, Negro businessmen are able to keep only a small portion of the Negro market. . . . The Negro storekeeper, on the other hand, is in severe competition with the white storekeeper, and only a fraction of the purchasing power of Negro patrons passes his counter. . . . Seldom have Negroes succeeded in keeping a substantial white market.

In the rural South, black tenant farmers were a captive market, relying on the overpriced and poor quality products furnished by the plantation commissary. One Mississippi landlord boasted that the combination of renting his land and furnishing renters supplies from his store resulted in paying his more than double what it
did when he worked fifty slaves on his land (Woodman 1990, 310–11). In the predominant black town of Clarksdale, Mississippi, blacks owned none of the town’s clothing, dry goods, or general merchandise stores (Ownby 1999). And in 1910, nearly all the white-owned stores on Atlanta’s Decatur Street traded exclusively with blacks (Rabinowitz 1978, 90). In a series of six articles on “race patronage,” The New York Age (1916) reported a similar pattern for Harlem where nearly all of the consumers were black, but 75 percent of the businesses were white, and black merchants received only about 20 to 25 percent of the retail trade.

While the black body was sought after for the exoticism, pleasure, thrill, and adventure it could offer, it was at the same time considered in the white mind to be untouchable. White entrepreneurs had little or no interest in competing with black entrepreneurs as undertakers, barbers, hairdressers, dressmakers, or as owners of so-called eating houses (Ownby 1999, 75). As late as 1963, G. K. Butterfield (2001, 22) of Wilson, North Carolina, described an incident in which an ambulance belonging to a white funeral home arrived to transport a patient to the hospital, but turned around and went back upon discovering that the patient was black. White insurance companies had little or no interest in insuring the black body, leading to the growth of a few large black insurance companies. An 1896 publication warned companies that it “would be unwise to insure Negroes because of social diseases, living conditions and other undesirable circumstances” (quoted in J. Walker 1998, 215). Except for the large insurance companies, black-owned businesses consisted mostly of small personal service businesses with which whites had little interest in competing. (Cohen 2003, 44).

The black streets of American towns and cities lacked the range of businesses necessary for interdependency or interlinking economic structures. Blassingame (1973, 215) explained that “antebellum proscriptions prevented [black entrepreneurs] from developing the business acumen and accumulating the capital necessary for large-scale economic enterprises.” Black commercial districts never developed localization economies necessary to attract additional businesses and compete in the larger marketplace. Du Bois (1931b, 314) observed, “Much of the retail business is done in small stores with small stocks of goods, where the owner works side by side with one or two helpers, and makes a personal profit less than a normal American wage.” Those who shopped the black streets of American cities often lacked access to low-cost mass merchandisers and effective competition, which made possible higher prices and devalued any dollar spent (Andreasen 1975, 1976, 186–87). They did not exchange equal value for equal value in the commodity circuit, paying more and getting less for the dollar than what they could get in the large-scale national chain stores. David Caplovitz (1963) found that for a given good or service, those who were marginalized often paid more than others. Capital is money in motion, but there was little exchange or circulation on the black streets of America.1 For,

White businesses captured most of the black consumer dollars that came primarily from wages paid by whites. Ironically, the surplus value of the labor of twentieth-century black wage earners was returned to whites in much the same way that the surplus value of the slaves’ labor was absorbed by their master. The black purchasing dollar in black business districts, then, circulated back into the white community. (J. Walker 1998, 215)

A survey by the publishers of Black Enterprise found that almost half of their readers (mostly middle-class blacks) spent less than 10 percent of their income with black-owned businesses (Bennett 1995). And it is estimated that for every eight to ten dollars spent in the black community, only one dollar remains there. A separate economy, shielded from the powers of the larger economy by fixed boundaries, is destined “to end up a ghetto” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 206).

Conclusion

Whereas Du Bois (1935), early on, saw the liberating possibilities of capitalism and blacks as consumers benefiting from it, he increasingly saw blacks excluding themselves from the larger economy as a viable alternative. While power relations were more problematic for racial distinction in the consumption circuit than in the production circuit, there was no fundamental distinction between powers of racial distinction in the two circuits. America made every effort to set limits to the extinguishment of racial differences in both circuits. Therefore, Du Bois saw blacks using their consumer power to develop “a nation within the nation,” even if it meant paying higher prices to black merchants for inferior quality of goods (Banner-Haley 1994, 23; see also Young 1973, 25–26).

Du Bois’s “nation within a nation” never developed. The capitalist economy, even with the “separate but equal” race doctrine, was still able to batter down all walls of a “nation within a nation.” The famous comments by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto on the commodification of products still applied. All Chinese walls continued to fall. The logic of capital not only knocked down all walls to a nation within a nation
but produced a world “empire” that fundamentally lacks walls. As Hardt and Negri (2000, 150–51) explain,

the ideology of the world market has always been the anti-foundational and anti-essentialist discourse par excellence. *Circulation, mobility, diversity, and mixture are its very conditions of possibility.* [emphasis mine] Trade brings differences together and the more the merrier. Differences (of commodities, populations, cultures, and so forth) seem to multiply infinitely in the world market, which attacks nothing more violently than fixed boundaries: it overwhelms any binary division with its infinite multiplicities.

Intercourse is in every direction. Social integration facilitates economic integration, which is good for business.

The logic behind an empire without borders is not new. Although this logic takes different forms at different historical moments, it has always been the driving force behind capital development, even at the moment of the highest stage of white supremacy. But for Hardt and Negri (2000), the empire without a border is potentially a liberating process, creating a new proletariat with a universal consciousness. But there is no historical evidence to suggest that the structural imperative of capital to expand the sphere of commodity exchange and consumption and create an empire without a border has been liberating for black America. In fact, history shows just the opposite. The empire without borders may create more hostility toward differences of all kinds than any new sense of freedom and liberating possibilities (Rustin 2003). It is precisely because of these liberating possibilities that America sought to make more visible white supremacy in both the production and commodity circuits. For America near the end of the nineteenth century, the liberating possibilities of capital created an intensification of racial fears that produced and sustained the “separate but equal” racial doctrine for half a century. It was a structural imperative of capital to develop and tap the relatively vital and potential market of former slaves. The *Plessy* decision provided the structure that satisfied this imperative and became the cornerstone of America’s race policy for most of the twentieth century. It provided the structure that reconciled the need of capital to expand the sphere of exchange and consumption and include blacks while also upholding the doctrine of white supremacy. For capital, the *equal* in “separate but equal” meant *equal access* to the black and white consumer markets, not *equality* between the races. Segregation achieved a quasisocial elimination of blacks without narrowing contact, engagement, interchange, and commerce, which is so important to generating profit. The effect was to articulate a geographical and social space that held fast race and did not subsume black spaces. Race is not external to capital, nor has it been subsumed by capital. Whenever faced with liberating possibilities that would have subsumed racial differences, the proletarians have rebelled. Black and white spaces were segregated but were presumed to be equal, providing what Wallerstein (1991) called the right dosage of inclusion (universalism) and exclusion (racism).

As it became clear that an all-black economy was not going to succeed, black advertisers made every effort to open the black consumer market to national and global companies (Ownby 1999, 125). But for Richard Wright (1944), the national chains with their brand products would destroy black culture whose future, he believed, lay in the possibilities of an international working class. And Du Bois, who earlier had shown a preference, even if lukewarm, for capitalism, also “capitulated to a Marxist political ideology” (C. S. Johnson 2003, 85). The civil rights movement—a more conservative movement than what Du Bois and Wright had in mind—would provide the “collective resistance” to overthrow the etiquette of white supremacy in the sphere of exchange and consumption (Fiske 1994, 481). Boycotting places of consumption (Figure 3) was one of the most forceful statements blacks could make about their place in the consumer culture (Ownby 1999, 151). The store, the restaurant, and bus were sites within individual and collective consumption where segregation was experienced most acutely and would be contested most bitterly in the struggle for civil rights. The Montgomery bus boycott, which was inspired by the 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott, lasted for more than a year and is probably the most notable example of this resistance (Austin 1994, 230, 231). The class interest that frustrated more exclusionary race policies at the turn of the twentieth century was the same interest that played a significant role in negotiations with black leaders that set the stage for civil rights gains (Wilson 2000). According to Earl Black and Merle Black (1987, 46), this transformation of the South was nothing more than “the southernization of the old American dream—to make and keep a lot of money,” to expand the sphere of commodity exchange and consumption.

With the end of segregation, blacks still would not achieve respect in exchange and consumption. Explaining that it “was something to drive a man mad,” W. E. B. Du Bois (1940, 136–37) described being ordered by a white lady in a Pullman car to bring her a glass of water, assuming him to be a porter. As a consumer, Du Bois could purchase the train fare—engage the sphere of exchange and consumption—but he still could not purchase the sign of social respect. The color of his skin
would determine his place, and his position, in society. In one of his last public addresses, Du Bois explained that the struggle for desegregation would be victorious in the end, but that the victory would not end racism (Marable 1991, 76–77). One does not have to cite the difficulties many blacks have in obtaining taxicabs in many cities and such nationally infamous cases as Denny’s and Shoney’s restaurants and Dillard’s and Adams Mark hotels to illustrate the level of racism black consumers continue to face (W. Smith and Shrestha 2000, 5). Many producers still take black consumers and their money for granted “as they insist that having their products or services associated with blacks’ conflicts with their efforts ‘to position strategically their products in the mainstream marketplace of upscale (white) consumers’” (Graves 1997, 7). In 2004, the retailer Abercrombie and Fitch agreed to a multimillion dollar settlement after black, Hispanic, and Asian employees accused the store of routinely positioning them in storerooms or back offices while whites were hired to interact with customers. Race remains an integral part of the landscape of commodity exchange and consumption.

Notes

1. South Africa’s racial policy of separate development also limited commodity exchange in black townships. All major roads and rails from black townships, if available, led to employment centers and the white retail shops in the city center. And in the late 1970s, the informal sector of the economy was banished from Johannesburg, assuring white access to the black market. The small retail volume in the black township of postapartheid Johannesburg is viewed among blacks as second-rate. (Tomlinson et al. 2003, 6, 16; Tomlinson and Larsen 2003, 44, 49).

References


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