INTRODUCTION

BRANDING THE AUTHENTIC

If there is, among all words, one that is inauthentic, then surely it is the word “authentic.”
Maurice Blanchot

Welcome to the future of Los Angeles. It is a city made up entirely of brands, logos, and trademarked characters. Every visual landmark in the city has been stamped with a brand. Every resident is a branded or licensed character: Ronald MacDonald wreaks havoc on the city, the cops are the rounded, treaded lumps of the Michelin tire logo, crowds of people are depicted as the America On-Line instant message logo, Bob’s Big Boy is taken hostage and finds a love match in the Esso girl. Anonymous individuals walk around the city with the trademark symbol ™ hovering about their heads. Scanning the skyline, we see the U-Haul building, the Eveready skyscraper, the MTV apartment building.

Corporate logos—Microsoft, BP, Enron, Visa, and countless others—blanket the city’s infrastructure, including the roads, cars, and even the city zoo. The animals in the zoo are also brands: the lion of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film corporation, the alligator from Lacoste clothing company, and Microsoft Window’s butterflies, with the zoo tour bus driven by the iconic Mr. Clean.
This is the world of Logorama, a sixteen-minute animated short film written and directed in 2009 by the French creative collective H5, composed of François Alaux, Hervé de Crécy, and Ludovic Houplain. The film’s simple and familiar narrative—which replicates an age-old trope of good versus evil—takes place in a futuristic, stylized, war-zone Los Angeles, where a homicidal psychopath armed with a gun takes people hostage, wreaks havoc on the city, and leads the police in a prolonged, violent chase. After the hostages escape, a natural apocalypse ensues: an earthquake destroys LA, and
what is left is immediately drowned with a tidal wave of oil. Logorama, in its own quirky, campy way, is a warning about the future.

What are we warned about? Brands. The motivation behind Logorama, according to the filmmakers, is to demonstrate the extent to which brands are ubiquitous, embedded in every aspect of our lives and relationships. The violent film, crafted entirely out of brands (more than 2,500 are used in the film), is an indictment of their ubiquity. The filmmakers intend the film as a critique of how a rabid consumerism is now taken for granted in Western culture. In their “alarming universe,” they collapse the distinction between (and thus reinforce the connection between) brands and individuals, brands and violence, and brands and natural disasters.³

In some ways, the subject matter of Logorama is also the subject matter of this book. The critique of consumer culture that is the heart of Logorama is also a critique of something else, equally important but perhaps even harder to define: the loss of a kind of authenticity. In the US, the 21st century is an age that hungers for anything that feels authentic, just as we lament more and more that it is a world of inauthenticity, that we are governed by superficiality. People pay exorbitant rents to live in the part of town that is edgy and “real,” that has not yet sold out to bland suburbia; we go to extraordinary lengths to prove we are not “sellouts”; we defensively define ourselves as “authentic.” Throughout, there is the looming sense that we are not real enough, that our world is becoming more and more inauthentic, despite our endless efforts to the contrary. Logorama fulfills our dark fears, epitomizes our great laments: it is a world where brands are everywhere, where even culture has been branded, where even authenticity has been trademarked.

I became interested in brand cultures because I was thinking about what consumer citizenship means within contemporary capitalism. In my previous work, I examined consumer citizenship from a variety of vantage points, such as postfeminist culture and the television industry, but the current moment felt different to me. Business models were now being used as structuring frameworks for cultural institutions such as the university, as well as for social change movements. My own students, eager for career advice, were now asking me about how to build a “self-brand.” I was struck by the use of market language in US politics, from the “Obama brand” to endless press accounts of how Democrats and Republicans have succeeded in trademarking their message, or protecting their brand. Perhaps most urgently, I was interested in, and dismayed by, the endless ways that people use the logic, strategies, and language of brands as a dominant way to express our politics, our creativity, our religious practices—indeed, our very selves.
This book is my attempt to define the processes that create the world of contemporary branding. Branding in our era has extended beyond a business model; branding is now both reliant on, and reflective of, our most basic social and cultural relations. First, then, a few definitions. I use the term “brand” to refer to the intersecting relationship between marketing, a product, and consumers. “Brand cultures” refers to the way in which these types of brand relationships have increasingly become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and affective relationships. There are different brand cultures that at times overlap and compete with each other: the brand culture of street art in urban spaces, religious brand cultures such as “New Age spirituality” and “Prosperity Christianity,” the culture of green branding with its focus on the environment. The practice of branding is typically understood as a complex economic tool, a method of attaching social or cultural meaning to a commodity as a means to make the commodity more personally resonant with an individual consumer. But it is my argument that in the contemporary era, brands are about culture as much as they are about economics. As marketers have continually relayed to me, brands are meant to invoke the experience associated with a company or product; far from the cynical view of academics, or beleaguered parents, brands are actually a story told to the consumer. When that story is successful, it surpasses simple identification with just a tangible product; it becomes a story that is familiar, intimate, personal, a story with a unique history. Brands become the setting around which individuals weave their own stories, where individuals position themselves as the central character in the narrative of the brand: “I’m a Mac user,” many of us say smugly, or, “I drink Coke, not Pepsi.” While brands are visible and often audible, through symbols and logos, through jingles and mottoes, through all means of visual and auditory design—and occasionally, even through a smell!—the definition of a brand exceeds its materiality. More than just the object itself, a brand is the perception—the series of images, themes, morals, values, feelings, and sense of authenticity conjured by the product itself. The brand is the essence of what will be experienced; the brand is a promise as much as a practicality.

Because a brand’s value extends beyond a tangible product, the process of branding—if successful—is different from commodification: it is a cultural phenomenon more than an economic strategy. Commodification implies the literal transformation of things into commodities; branding is a much more deeply interrelated and diffused set of dynamics. To commodify something means to turn it into, or treat it as, a commodity; it means to make commercial something that was not previously thought of as a product, such as a melody or racial identity. Commodification is a marketing strategy, a
monetization of different spheres of life, a transformation of social and cultural life into something that can be bought and sold. In contrast, the process of branding impacts the way we understand who we are, how we organize ourselves in the world, what stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. While commodities are certainly part of branding—indeed, commodities are a crucial part of these stories about ourselves—the process of branding is broader, situated within culture. It is this cultural process of branding—that marks the transformation of everyday, lived culture to brand culture—with which this book is concerned.

Even if we discard as false a simple opposition between the authentic and the inauthentic, we still must reckon with the power of authenticity—of the self, of experience, of relationships. It is a symbolic construct that, even in a cynical age, continues to have cultural value in how we understand our moral frameworks and ourselves, and more generally how we make decisions about how to live our lives. We want to believe—indeed, I argue that we need to believe—that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions, something outside of mere consumer culture, something above the reductiveness of profit margins, the crassness of capital exchange.

In the following chapters, then, I examine cultural spaces that we like to think of as “authentic”—self-identity, creativity, politics, and religion—and the ways these spaces are increasingly formed as branded spaces, structured by brand logic and strategies, and understood and expressed through the language of branding. This transformation of culture of everyday living into brand culture signals a broader shift, from “authentic” culture to the branding of authenticity. Contemporary brand cultures are so thoroughly imbricated with culture at large that they become indistinguishable from it.

So I ask, in the ensuing pages: What happens to authenticity in a brand culture? What are the stakes for living in a world that resembles *Logorama*? While I resist the causal relationship implied by the film—brand culture unequivocally leads to global disaster—I do have grave concerns about the increasing presence in the West of brands as symbolic structures for crafting selves, creativity, politics, and spirituality. At the same time, I try to avoid the simple assumption that situates branding and consumer culture as oppositional to “real” politics and culture. Not all brand cultures are the same, nor do they contain the same pitfalls (or promises). Rather than generalize all branding strategies as egregious effects of today’s market, and think wistfully of a bygone world that was truly authentic, it is more productive to situate brand cultures in terms of their ambivalence, where both economic imperatives and “authenticity” are expressed and experienced simultaneously. Thus, this book looks at key cultural contexts where we craft our individual
identities—the realms of creativity, religion, politics, history—to see how brand cultures operate within them, and analyzes these contexts for their productive contradictions.

The Culture of the Brand

Everyone who lives in the US in the 21st century has a relationship with brands: the products that we recognize from an image or even just a font; the numerous items that we buy (or try to avoid buying) because they are made by a particular company. Coca-Cola, Apple, Starbucks, Levi’s, Visa, MTV, and thousands of others inundate the cultural, economic, and political landscape of everyday life.

The legitimacy of the brand is now established, regularized, and surveyed in a way that is unique to contemporary culture. But precisely because of the uniqueness of our branded landscape, it can be understood by looking at its connections to earlier histories of the market and culture. In the US of the 18th century, branding was the very literal process of creating and distributing a brand name that was protected by a trademark. This was signified, for instance, by the branding of cattle so that ranchers could differentiate their herds. The emergence of mass production as part of the industrialization of the 19th century, alongside changes in technologies (including printing and design), transportation, and labor practices, ushered in a new era of branding. As branding became more of a normative practice, commodities began to take on cultural “value” because of the way in which they were imaged, packaged, and distributed in an increasingly competitive commercial landscape. The attention (and money) paid to the way a product was branded and distributed only increased in the 20th century. By the mid-20th century, as I develop in chapter 1, companies recognized what Liz Moor signals as the heightened “necessity of cultural value for economic value” and leveraged branding as a way to market to a mass culture, a strategy that took shape in an America marked by immigration, persistent social and cultural conflict, and two world wars. Moor notes that after World War II, “People were encouraged to buy these brand-name products as a sign of their own loyalty to this new version of America, but the success of such injunctions appears to have depended in large part upon the fact that brand-name commodities would have fulfilled a pressing social need for common bonds, and for a common vernacular language, among socially disparate groups during a time of immense upheaval.”

My focus here is on the later 20th and early 21st centuries, when branding seems to be fulfilling an even more “pressing social need” in the US: arguably all areas of social relations and cultural life are commercialized, and
common bonds and common language are articulated and experienced, as corporations have longed dreamed, through consumption. Given the reliance of Fordist and post-Fordist capitalism on marketing and advertising, the eventual emergence of branding as a primary marketing strategy and cultural form makes sense. The connection between marketing, commercialization, and cultural values, however, is neither direct nor deterministic. The relationship between commerce and culture is formed obliquely, through a multilayered set of dynamic historical discourses. As Viviana Zelizer argues, historically there has been a general aversion to monetizing the relationships between individuals and culture; in law, social arrangements, and individual relations there has been a "resistance to evaluating human beings in monetary terms." But changes in Western political economies, from industrialization to liberal capitalism to post-Fordist capitalism to neoliberalism, mark shifts not only in how culture itself is valued but also in how individuals themselves are given particular value.

As Zelizer reminds us, economic exchange is organized in and by cultural meanings. But contemporary brand culture also comes at this dynamic from the opposite direction: cultural meanings are organized by economic exchange. The process of branding is created and validated in these interrelated dynamics. As I discuss throughout this book, a number of entangled discourses and practices are involved in the complex process of branding: it entails the making and selling of immaterial things—feelings and affects, personalities and values—rather than actual goods. It engages the labor of consumers so that there is not a clear demarcation between marketer and consumer, between seller and buyer. The engagement of consumers as part of building brands, through such practices as consumer-generated content online and the coproduction of brands by consumers through customization, potentially engenders new relationships between the buyer and the bought, the latest in an ever-expanding catalog of branding logic and language.

Celia Lury points out that the invention of “social marketing” and the increasing reliance of contemporary marketers on nonbusiness approaches (such as anthropology and sociology) have encouraged a shift in perception on the part of both consumers and marketers as to what it means to “brand” a product. Indeed, Lury notes that one of the key stages in late 20th-century branding practices is “a changed view of the producer-consumer relationship: no longer viewed in terms of stimulus-response, the relation was increasingly conceived of as an exchange.” This changed relationship requires labor on the part of both consumers and marketers. This is perhaps most starkly demonstrated in the increasing corporate use of social media, such as when a corporation has a “personal” Facebook page; or uses of YouTube to promote
commercial endeavors, where consumers and marketers engage in “authentic” exchanges that help to build corporate brands. Through the use of such social media, marketers increasingly assume (and exploit) the existence of consumers’ dialogic relationship with cultural products and emphasize an affective exchange between corporations and consumers. As a relationship based on exchange (even if this is an unequal exchange), branding cannot be explained as commodification or as the mere incorporation of cultural spheres of life by advanced capitalism. As Tiziana Terranova has pointed out, explaining the labor of consumers as commodification or corporate appropriation usually presumes the co-option of an “authentic” element of a consumer’s life by a marketer: the creation of street art, for instance, when sponsored by a corporation is understood as “selling out”; a similar “crime” against authenticity is the manufacturing of T-shirts featuring the words “Jesus is my homeboy,” which are then sold at chain retail stores. Explaining brand culture as a sophisticated form of corporate appropriation, then, keeps intact the idea that corporate culture exists outside—indeed, in opposition to—“authentic” culture. Rather than thinking of incorporation by capital from some “authentic” place outside of consumerism, brand culture requires a more complex frame of analysis, where incorporation, as Terranova points out, is not about capital encroaching on authentic culture but rather is a process of transforming and shifting cultural labor into capitalist business practices. This channeling of labor into business practices is precisely what mobilizes the building of brand cultures by individual consumers and what distinguishes brand culture in the contemporary moment. It is also a hallmark of contemporary social media and consumer participation, which in turn distinguishes branding from more conventional marketing.

In a broad sense, one of the initial motivating factors for me in writing this book involved thinking through these kinds of politics within advanced capitalism. While I recognize how commodification works as a powerful corporate tool in advanced capitalism, it also seemed that the ubiquity of brand culture signaled something else. Commodities and money do not circulate in the same way in different spheres of life. I discuss these different modes of circulation in the chapters in this book and think about the ways brand cultures also authorize consumption as praxis—the act of buying goods that have a politics attached to them or critiquing consumer culture through corporate-sponsored street art.

In the contemporary US, building a brand is about building an affective, authentic relationship with a consumer, one based—just like a relationship between two people—on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations. Brands create what Raymond Williams called a
structure of feeling, an ethos of intangible qualities that resonate in different ways with varied communities. We cannot productively think about brand culture, or what brands mean for culture, without accounting for the affective relational quality—the *experience*—of brands. These affective relationships with brands are slippery, mobile, and often ambivalent, which makes them as powerful and profitable as they are difficult to predict and discuss. It is through these affective relationships that our very selves are created, expressed, and validated. Far more than an economic strategy of capitalism, brands are the cultural spaces in which individuals feel safe, secure, relevant, and authentic.

Culture, in this sense, indicates the values and affect, the hopes and anxieties, the material artifacts and the power dynamics upon which we construct our individual lives, our communities, our histories. Williams, when writing about the “ordinariness” of culture in 1958, perhaps could not have predicted the ways in which capitalism would come to define global networks of production, consumption, and distribution. He situated culture and capitalism as related but not determined by each other; he opposed the idea that relations of production could somehow direct culture because culture is something made “by living.” And yet in a moment of global advanced capitalism, the making—and selling, and using—of things is often impossible to separate from the ways that we make our own lives. Brand strategies and logics are not only the backdrop but also become the tools for “living” in culture. Culture is some thing, some place, that is made and remade, and therefore depends on individuals in relation to a system of production. In the contemporary moment, branding is part of this making and remaking, and is part of culture that is produced and given meaning by consumers. There is of course much that is left out of culture if we rely on a static definition of capitalism as its central frame. Yet as brand logic and strategies become normative contexts for the forming of individual and social relations of affect and emotion, the relationship between culture and economic logic grows deeper and more entangled. Connecting brand to culture thus challenges a historical aversion to defining culture in economic terms, but not because brand culture simply “seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.” Rather than positioning the market as my entry point in this analysis, following Williams I center *culture*, focusing on the ways in which it is continually reimagined and reshaped, a process inherently ambivalent and contradictory. US culture is predicated not on the separate domains of individual experience, everyday life, and the market but rather on their deep interrelation.

The interpenetration of brands and culture is not simply another logical stop on a capitalist continuum. Rather, a great deal is at stake in a life
lived through the culture of brands. When individuals invest in brands as “authentic” culture, it privileges individual relationships over collective ones and helps to locate the individual, rather than the social, as a site for political action (or inaction) and cultural change (or merely exchange).

Clamoring for Authenticity

The authentic is tricky to define. Its definition has been the subject of passionate debates involving far-ranging thinkers, from Plato to Marx, from Andy Warhol to Lady Gaga. I am not offering a new definition of authenticity. Nor am I arguing for a return to a “pure,” unbranded authenticity. I am, however, thinking about how, and in what ways, the concept of authenticity remains central to how individuals organize their everyday activities and craft their very selves. Moreover, in a culture that is increasingly understood and experienced through the logic and strategies of commercial branding, and in a culture characterized by the postmodern styles of irony, parody, and the superficial, the concept of authenticity seems to carry even more weight, not less. In the following pages, I explore the ways in which the “authentic” is brought to bear in brand culture. More specifically, I discuss the maintenance of authenticity in two, interrelated ways: as a cultural space defined by branding, and as a relationship between consumers and branders.

Many scholars of consumer culture, both historical and contemporary, have argued that in the face of brands and commodities we risk a loss of “authentic” humanity. The branded spaces I examine in Authentic™—the self, creativity, politics, religion—are precisely those spaces that have been historically understood as “authentic,” positioned and understood as outside the crass realm of the market. What is understood (and experienced) as authentic is considered such precisely because it is perceived as not commercial. Even when history bears out the fallacy of this binary, as it inevitably does, individuals continue to invest in the notion that authentic spaces exist—the space of the self, of creativity, of spirituality. Social theorists and commentators from Rousseau to Marx to Thoreau have contemplated the space of the authentic as a space that is not material. This arrangement is mirrored within individuals: the authentic resides in the inner self (or, for Marx, the unalienated self); the outer self is merely an expression, a performance, and is often corrupted by material things (and more specifically, as Marx points out so eloquently, by capitalism). Thoreau and Rousseau saw a clear distinction between the authentic inner self and the performative outer self and saw social and cultural relations as a potential threat to individual authenticity. For these thinkers, as well as Marx, this threat was not empty but had serious consequences, leading individuals to invert values and
fetishize commodities as if they were living things. The inauthentic, commercial world alienates us from social interaction and constructs such interactions as spurious and dehumanizing.21

The binary link between commercial and inauthentic, and noncommercial and authentic, is no doubt too simple. But at the same time, it seems that even the theorizing of Marx and others is no longer adequate to describe the penetration of the material world into our inner lives. It is becoming more and more clear that brand culture shapes not only consumer habits but also political, cultural, and civic practices, so that, in the contemporary era, brands have become what Lury calls a “logos” that structures, rationalizes, and cultivates everyday life.22 The concept of brands as logos, and the idea that branding is a primary context for identity construction and creative production, indicates a shift in focus from our persistent frame of reference: instead of debating whether or not we fetishize the commodities we buy, and whether or not those commodities oppress the people who make them, I am now thinking through what it means that authenticity itself is a brand, and that “authentic” spaces are branded.

Some contemporary scholars use this perilous state of authenticity as a central focus in their critique of Western consumption. Naomi Klein published her manifesto against global consumer culture, No Logo, in 2000, which resonated with a large audience, many of whom were nervous and angry at the sophisticated methods of contemporary advertising and branding and the seeming unstoppable presence of messages to consume, on billboards, in music videos, on the streets. Klein warned citizens to pay attention to “brands, not products,” asking us to think deeper than the discrete consumer purchase and to look at how global capitalism structures our lives.23 And, indeed, within the 21st century, branding and advertising strategies are increasingly complex, especially in a digital media environment where viral ads, guerrilla marketing, online consumer campaigns and competitions, and user feedback mechanisms are ways for corporations to script advertising messages that feel distinctly noncommercial, and therefore authentic.24

In this thoroughly branded landscape, two opposing schools of thought have emerged in the last few decades. I term these the “anticonsumerism” and the “consumer-as-agent” camps. The former is composed primarily of critical scholars, such as Klein, Kalle Lasn, Juliet Schor, Thomas Frank, and other anticonsumerism scholars and activists, who rightly point out the ubiquity of advertising, marketing, and branding in everyday life.

However, their critiques often maintain the same distinct boundary between a consumer capitalist space and an authentic one as Thoreau, Rousseau, and Marx did in earlier periods of capitalism.25 For these contemporary
thinkers, as with their predecessors, authenticity is still possible because they believe space exists outside of consumer capitalism.

This binary is particularly present in indictments over “selling cool,” where marketers and advertisers have a long history of appropriating counterculture aesthetics, reformulating an aesthetics of resistance into something marketable, thus dissipating any fear or anxiety about what might be the consequences of such resistance.26 Related to this, Michael Serazio, in his work on guerrilla marketing, makes a plea to citizens “for consumer restraint and reflection—advocating true discipline and real discovery external to commercial culture.”27 Klein calls advertisers and marketers who sell cool “cultural traitors,” implying that the context for everyday living is one in which “selling out” is a viable, if undesirable, action to take. Lasn’s anticonsumerist magazine Adbusters features strategies (in a kind of updated Situationist style) to help us expose advertising as an elaborate hoax, which manipulates and tricks consumers at every turn. These arguments all revolve around an accepted notion of corporate appropriation or a Marxist idea of alienated labor—either of which presumes a market determination and a dynamic of power that, albeit sophisticated and networked, nonetheless functions linearly.

Henry Jenkins, Clay Shirky, and Yochai Benkler (among others) are prominent representatives of the opposing camp. They argue that the anti-consumerism position gives too much power to advertisers and not enough to consumers.28 For these theorists, “selling cool” is not always a manipulative corporate hoax or a co-optation of the authentic. Instead, they recognize the complicated ways in which cultural dynamics and media converge. In these accounts, the relationship between consumers and corporate power might be about profit motive, but it also can pave the way for a range of other kinds of relations to consumers. Consumers and advertisers coexist (though perhaps in contradiction) in this landscape. The problem in these accounts is that power clearly does not function on an equal playing field within advanced capitalism, so that a singular focus on who has more power—the corporate brand or the consumer—misses out on how power is created as a dynamic, often contradictory force, and similarly maintains a pristine definition of the authentic. Concentrating on individual and corporate uses of power within brand culture obscures the ways in which other entangled discourses in culture are deeply interrelated within it. In other words, power does not always work in a predictable, logical way, as something either corporations or individuals can possess and wield. Power is often exercised in contradictory ways, and brand cultures, like other cultures, are ambivalent, often holding possibility for individual resistance and corporate hegemony simultaneously. Individual resistance within consumer
culture is defined and exercised within the parameters of that culture; to assume otherwise is to believe in a space outside consumerism that is somehow unfettered by profit motive and the political economy. This is nostalgia for authenticity.

I position the authentic differently from either an anticonsumerism or a consumer-as-agent position. Brand culture is not defined by a smooth flow of content across media platforms or cooperation between multiple media industries, nor is it a context for consistent corporate appropriation. What other explanations can be found if we look beyond the authentic versus the fake, the empowered consumer versus corporate dominance? This kind of explanation needs to begin with an understanding of brand cultures as culture, complete with competing power relations and individual production and practice. And, this explanation is largely missing from scholarly discourse on consumption and branding, and allows us to analyze the cultural meanings of branding without resorting to a binary that is often unproductive. Within contemporary brand culture the separation between the authentic self and the commodity self not only is more blurred, but this blurring is more expected and tolerated. That is, within contemporary consumer culture we take it for granted that authenticity, like anything else, can be branded. In the current moment, rather than representing the loss of authentic humanity,
the authentic and commodity self are intertwined within brand culture, where authenticity is itself a brand.

But authenticity is not only understood and experienced as the pure, inner self of the individual, it is also a relationship between individuals and commodity culture that is constructed as “authentic.”[30] The organization of cultural meaning by economic exchange does not mean, by default, that the relationship individuals have with commodities is spurious or inauthentic; rather, that exchange is a construction of a relationship within the parameters of brand culture. Consider, for example, contemporary individuals’ relationship with religion constituted through branded megachurches and burgeoning industries such as yoga; the revitalization of urban cities as branded, creative spaces for people to “authentically” express themselves; the amplifying mandate to develop a “self-brand” as a way to strategically market oneself personally and professionally. Appending “brand” to “culture,” then, indicates not only the revaluation of culture but also a mapping out of the affective and authentic relationships that are formed within brand cultures—relationships that are unique to this historical moment, shaped by both the constraints and the possibilities of a brand-obsessed world.

While there is much to be said about how and why particular brand campaigns are successful and others are not, or about how marketers need to engage audiences through brand relationships, this book is not about how we react emotionally to particular brands like, say, Coke or Apple; nor is it about how to craft clever branding campaigns, or how to build a better or more fulfilling relationship between brands and consumers. Rather, I examine how areas of our lives that have historically been considered noncommercial and “authentic”—namely, religion, creativity, politics, the self—have recently become branded spaces. These cultural spaces of presumed authenticity not only are often created and sustained using the same kinds of marketing strategies that branding managers use to sell products but also are increasingly only legible in culture through and within the logic and vocabulary of the market. This book, then, is my attempt to think through what it means to live in advanced capitalism, to live a life through brands. The spaces I explore in the following pages are spaces that have been historically considered “authentic,” that are now increasingly formed as branded spaces, undergirded by brand logic and articulated through the language of branding. Above all else, my argument here is that branding is different from commercialization or marketing: it is deeply, profoundly cultural. As culture, it is ambivalent. To understand what is at stake in living in brand cultures, we need to account for this ambivalence, explore its possibilities, and think about what the emergence of brand culture means for individual identities, the creation of culture, and the formation of power.
In October 2006, the promotion company Ogilvy & Mather created “Evolution,” the first in a series of viral videos for Dove soap.² The ninety-five-second video advertisement depicts an ordinary woman going through elaborate technological processes to become a beautiful model: through time-lapse photography, we watch the woman having makeup applied and her hair curled and dried. The video then cuts to a computer screen, where the woman’s face is airbrushed to make her cheeks and brow smooth, as well as Photoshopped and manipulated: her neck is elongated, her eyes widened, her nose narrowed.

The video is not subtle; it is a blatant critique of the artificiality and unreality of the women produced by the beauty industry. The concluding tagline reads, “No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted. Take part in the Dove Real Beauty Workshops for Girls.”

According to its website, the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty is “a global effort that is intended to serve as a starting point for societal change and act as a catalyst for widening the definition and discussion of beauty.”
one of a growing number of brand efforts that harness the politicized rhetoric of commodity activism. In short, the “Evolution” video makes a plea to consumers to act politically through consumer behavior—in this case, by establishing a very particular type of brand loyalty with Dove products. The company suggested that by purchasing Dove products, and by inserting themselves into this ad campaign, consumers could “own” their personalized message. Rather than the traditional advertising route of buying advertising slots to distribute the video, Dove posted it on YouTube. It quickly became a viral hit, with millions of viewers sharing the video through email and other media-sharing websites.\(^3\) Well received outside of advertising, the video won the Viral and Film categories Grand Prix awards at Cannes Lions 2007.

With its self-esteem workshops and bold claim that the campaign can be a “starting point for societal change,” the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty is a current example of commodity activism, one of the ways that advertisers and marketers use brands as lucrative avenues for social activism, and social movements in turn use brands as launch points for specific political issues.\(^4\) Commodity activism reshapes and reimagines forms and practices of social (and political) activism into marketable commodities and takes specific form within brand culture.\(^5\) It has a heightened presence in today’s neoliberal era, which has seen an incorporation of politics and anticonsumption practices into the logics of merchandising, the ubiquity of celebrity activists and philanthropists, and yet a new configuration of the consumer citizen. Like other forms of social or political activism, commodity activism hinges on a central
goal of empowerment. However, despite the social-change rhetoric framing much commodity activism, the empowerment aimed for is most often personal and individual, not one that emerges from collective struggle or civic participation. In this context of brand culture, the individual is a flexible commodity that can be packaged, made, and remade—a commodity that gains value through self-empowerment.

Commodity activism takes shape within the logic and language of branding and is a compelling example of the ambivalence that structures brand culture. This kind of activism not only illustrates the contradictions, contingencies, and paradoxes shaping consumer capital today but also exemplifies the connections—sometimes smooth, sometimes contradictory—between merchandising, political ideologies, and consumer citizenship. The Dove campaign represents a historical moment of transition, José Johnston notes, characteristic of the kind of change unique to contemporary commodity activism: “While formal opportunities for citizenship seemed to retract under neoliberalism, opportunities for a lifestyle politics of consumption rose correspondingly.”5 Dove offers a productive lens not only into this rise but also into the concurrent retraction of social services and collective organizing that are characteristic of the current political economy—in other words, into the contemporary neoliberal world where anyone, apparently, can become a successful entrepreneur, can find and express their authentic self, or can be empowered by the seemingly endless possibilities in digital spaces, and yet where the divide between rich and poor continues to grow. In
this context, personal empowerment is ostensibly realized through occupying the subject position of the consumer citizen. According to today’s market logic, consumer citizens can satisfy their individual needs through consumer behavior, thus rendering unnecessary the collective responsibilities that have historically been expected from a citizen.\footnote{Dove is merely one example of an increasingly visible kind of commodity activism in the 21st-century brand culture of the US. Certainly, commodity activism did not appear as a direct result of late 20th-century and early 21st-century neoliberal capitalism. Boycotts, such as those in US civil rights movements for equal African American and white consumer rights, Ralph Nader’s consumer advocacy of the 1960s and 1970s, and the emergence of “ethical consumption” in the 1980s, could be accurately called commodity activism. In this chapter, I am interested in tracing the relationships these histories have with contemporary definitions of branded activism.}

Contemporary forms of commodity activism are often animated by and experienced through brand platforms. Individual consumers demonstrate their politics by purchasing particular brands over others in a competitive marketplace; specific brands are attached to political aims and goals, such as Starbucks coffee and fair trade, or a RED Gap T-shirt and fighting AIDS in Africa. Contemporary commodity activism positions political action as part of a competitive, capitalist brand culture, so that activism is reframed as realizable through supporting particular brands; activism is as easy as a swipe of your credit card. This competitive context for commodity activism, like the context for brands themselves, means that some forms of activism have a heightened visibility while others are rendered invisible. That is, if activism is retooled as a kind of product that either prospers or fails through capitalism’s circuits of exchange, then some kinds of activism are more “brandable” than others. The vocabulary of brand culture is mapped onto social and political activism, so that the forces that propel and legitimate competition among and between brands also do the same kind of cultural work for activism.

Within these dynamics, the brand is the legitimating factor, no matter what the specific political ideology or practice in question. That is, the flexibility of branding enables a given brand to absorb politics, but that flexibility is subject to the market. In the case of Dove, the politics embraced by the company involves gender and self-esteem. To be blunt, girls’ self-esteem is hot: there are best-selling books and Hollywood movies about “mean girls,” eating disorders continue to be a problem for young girls (and one that is not confined to the white middle class), popular culture is constantly regaling the latest efforts by female celebrities to conform to an idealized feminine
body. Girls’ self-esteem in the early 21st century, in other words, is remarkably brandable.

While I argue in this book for a broad definition of brand cultures, experienced through expansive brand logics and strategies, in this chapter I examine broad ramifications through a focus on one specific brand. Dove, owned by the global personal care company Unilever, is currently the world’s top-selling cleansing bar. In the 1990s, Dove began to expand its product line beyond soap, and the line now includes shampoos, conditioners, deodorant, and other cleansing products for women. Dove began to attract global attention in 2004 for its marketing and branding; the company hired Ogilvy & Mather in that year to develop a series of ads portraying the “real beauty” of ordinary women. In 2006, Dove started the Dove Self-Esteem Fund, which purports to “be an agent of change” through educating girls and women on a “wider definition of beauty.” These brand campaigns have received much public attention for their efforts to intervene in advertising’s standard representations of femininity, in which models are primarily white, thin, and blond, and thus exclude the majority of the world’s citizens. As a challenge to this idealized image, Dove initially distributed ads that featured “real” women of different sizes and ethnicities, with slogans such as “tested on real curves.” It is this reimagined brand identity of Dove, updated and experienced in 2010 as a multimedia, interactive campaign including videos, blogs, online resources for girls and women, and international workshops on self-esteem, that is the specific focus of this chapter, where I will trace the trajectory from selling products to selling identities to selling culture through an analysis of “real beauty” as well as Dove campaigns from two earlier eras.

Commodity Activism in Three Moments of Economic Transition

Commodity feminism, where feminist ideals such as self-empowerment and agency are attached to products as a selling point, is one specific element of commodity activism, which in turn is one part of the larger story of the historical emergence of brand culture. As an example of commodity feminism, or what some have called “power femininity,” the Real Beauty campaign brings into relief a debate over the relationship between gender and consumer culture that has been taking place, in both national arguments and everyday interactions, since at least the 19th century. The question, in some ways, is simple: Have women “been empowered by access to the goods, sites, spectacles, and services associated with mass consumption”? Writing about “power femininity” in ads, Michele Lazar characterizes this “knowledge as
power" trope within contemporary marketing as an element of consumer-based empowerment, where brands like Dove offer educational services to consumers so that they can develop skills to become their own experts on self-esteem. The development of these skills is positioned, in turn, as a conduit to self-empowerment. The Dove Real Beauty campaign, through its workshops and media resources, claims to enable girls to become confident and self-reliant through healthy self-esteem.

As Victoria de Grazia, Susan Bordo, Lynn Spigel, and many others have pointed out, there are a variety of points of entry into debates about consumer empowerment for women, ranging from historical analyses of consumer culture’s empowering expansion of middle-class women’s social and institutional boundaries to examinations of consumer culture representations of women and the “female” audience. My examination of the Dove Real Beauty campaign approaches it as one of many contemporary examples of an advanced capitalist strategy that restages corporate and managerial practices (such as those of Unilever) into political, and in this case feminist, and social contexts. In the relentless search for profit, this retooled capitalism is built upon a restructuring of traditional identities (in this case, of gender) and social relations (in this case, between consumer and producer). Needless to say, some shifts in identity and relationships are easier to brand than others; wanting to improve girls’ self-esteem is not a controversial political platform (unlike, say, immigration rights or same-sex marriage). In addition, the issue has a vast market—from self-help books to reality television shows to pedagogical initiatives—in the US that supports Dove’s particular commodity activism. Nevertheless, it is worth reconsidering the logic of such brand campaigns. Why does a company driven by profit care about social issues? How did we get here? What is the historical context for this neoliberal recontextualization?

As much as marketers will tell you otherwise, the market itself is only part of the story. So when considering habits of consumption within advanced capitalism, and what that tells us about our identities and our relationships, we also must consider the equally important, but more abstract, notion of what constitutes a commodity in the first place. Is racial or gender identity a commodity? Can the pursuit of social justice be commodified? If the answer to these and similar questions is yes, what does that mean for individuals, institutions, and politics? What does it mean in terms of how cultural values are changing? Exploring the ramifications of commodification means considering what it means to be a social activist in an environment that above all else values self-empowerment and entrepreneurial individualism.
In order to address such questions, I examine commodity activism at three historical moments in US culture. These historical moments represent industry-defined transitions in relations of production, the creation of markets, and consumer culture. Crucial to each are technological shifts that are created, supported, and enabled by specific understandings of consumer capital as well as shifting notions of political and cultural subjectivity.

- First, I examine mass consumption within Fordist capitalism of the mid-20th century. In this era both broadcast media (such as film, broadcast television, and radio) and political subjectivity were often formulated collectively (from membership in one’s social class or the imagined homogeneous, relatively undifferentiated audience).
- Second, I explore niche marketing and post-Fordist (or late) capitalism in the late 20th century. Here, new information technologies and narrowcast media (such as cable television and the Internet) fragment the formerly broad, mass audience into groups of more diverse communities. These audiences are differentiated by specific racialized or gendered groups (as well as other identity groups), and their “identities” are imagined (and marketed to) accordingly.
- Third, I examine individuated marketing and neoliberal labor practices of the late 20th century and early 21st century. These include immaterial labor, which is animated by the digital economy, and the blurring of consumer and producer identities (as with “viral” ads, user-generated online content, and brand culture), so that the individual cultural entrepreneur is celebrated as one who populates a radically “free” market.

To be clear, charting three economies is not an indication that one cultural and economic context ends as another begins; rather, there remains overlap between all three economies, and they both detractions from and inherit legacies of their predecessors. These historical moments map transitions—some advancements, some retrenchments—in a longer history of culture, economy, and the construction of subjectivity within the capitalist episteme. It is often, as de Grazia reminds us, in the moments of transition—such as those I have outlined—that tensions around meanings of identities become especially visible.\textsuperscript{15}

Getting “Creamed”: Mid-20th-Century Mass Audiences and the Unified Subject

Interpreting advertisements targeted to women offers insight to the various ways in which gender and national identity intersect in different ways
at different historical stages. Beauty and hygiene products have long been connected, by marketers and consumers alike, to broader relationships between personal identity, dominant racial and gender formations, and the nation. Soap, for instance, has historically been a rich vehicle for the notion of consumption as a kind of civic duty. Even in the 19th century, as Anne McClintock has shown, soap (and other commodities) stood in for values that traversed the cleanliness of the physical body into the "cleanliness" of the social body. Commodities were seen to represent cultural and social value, and through visual representations in advertising, they affirmed racial and gender hierarchies. In particular, as McClintock demonstrates, in the colonial building of empire of the 19th century, "Soap flourished not only because it created and filled a spectacular gap in the domestic market but also because, as a cheap and portable domestic commodity, it could persuasively mediate the Victorian poetics of racial hygiene and imperial progress."

Into the 20th century, feminine beauty products continued to be associated with national identity and rhetorics of American "progress." Yet at the same time, the cultivation of a female consumer base authorized new social positions for women that disrupted traditional gender hierarchies in US society. Historian Kathy Peiss, for example, challenges a reductionist account of cosmetics as merely "masks" for apparent feminine shortcomings—whether these masks are imposed by patriarchal society (women needing artifice to compete) or by racist culture ("whiteners" and other means to affirm racist hierarchies among women). Rather, Peiss argues that women's consumption of cosmetics needs to be understood within a broader context of struggles between consumer conformity and female empowerment. While surely the marketing of cosmetics contributed to the commodification of gendered identity (where types of women are branded as products), it also, as Peiss argues, destabilized traditional gendered hierarchies based on notions of public and private and helped establish a kind of cultural legitimacy for women. Cosmetics marketing in the early and mid-20th century was thus not only about capitalizing on individual insecurities for profit but also about creating and perpetuating a changing definition of womanhood; creating a market exclusively for women, and thus inviting women to participate in the market, shifted and challenged previously held notions of public and private spheres. Because of the changing position of the middle-class woman in postwar American culture (brought on by various social forces, including suburban migration, an emergent ideology of the ideal nuclear family, and marketing to the housewife), feminine beauty products reflect the dynamics of an era defined by the mass production and then mass consumption of consumer goods.
The postwar context, federal housing policies that privileged white middle-class families, suburban development and the subsequent marginalization of racial and ethnic communities to urban spaces, the ideological solidification of the nuclear family, the role that white middle-class women played in the wartime workforce, the new and increasingly normative presence of the television in the privatized American home—all were factors in the shifting public and private terrain of consumer culture in this historical moment. Advertising and marketing relied on cultural tropes that normalized and naturalized these dynamics, positioning them as conduits of access to national gendered identity. Marketers and artists alike increasingly turned to public space, such as buildings and billboards, to both create art and advertise wares. The public relations industry is born. Highway systems are built, automobiles are increasingly affordable, and with the two come a concomitant mobility and migration. Market-driven networks of communication, such as mass magazines, broadcast television, Hollywood film, and advertising, facilitated relationships between political and social identities and consumption behavior, a practice that only increased as new markets—for women, for African Americans, for families—were created and then capitalized upon.

During this postwar period, then, the values of both citizenship and consumption began to merge in new ways. Consumption habits of white, middle-class Americans not only were framed as choices of what material goods to purchase but also were understood as larger symbols of individualism, freedom, and equality. This is the context for what Lizabeth Cohen calls a "consumer's republic," where political and social values previously tied to more abstract political ideologies, such as freedom, democracy, and equality, were newly understood as accessible specifically through the promises of consumer capitalism. As Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright write, "Thus individual consumerism, rather than social policy, was offered beginning in the 1950s in the United States as the means to achieve the promise of social change and prosperity." It was not simply that purchasing goods signaled the storied upward economic mobility of the postwar years; consumption was now a means to construct a specific identity within the "consumer's republic" of the US. This shift, this awareness that consumer choices could be political choices, is crucial to the later emergence of commodity activism.

For instance, consider a Dove soap television ad from 1957. We watch a white, blond, female actor in the bathtub, clearly enjoying herself beneath a hyperbolic, male voice-over: "From Lever House, in New York City, comes the greatest skin care discovery of our time! Its name is Dove! This amazing
new bath and toilet bar is actually one-quarter cleansing cream... Ordinary soap dries your skin. But Dove creams your skin while you wash.”

From the opening shot of a towering New York City skyscraper to the dramatic appearance of a bar of Dove soap amid a flock of flying doves to the pseudoscientific demonstration of the amount of cleansing cream in the soap, the ad is typical for its late-fifties genre. The touted powers of Dove are then demonstrated by the female actor, who is depicted not only washing her face but also taking a luxurious bubble bath with Dove, promising its users that it will leave them with a “velvety, just-creamed feeling.” The ad then turns to an “experiment” with the female actor, described by a female, vaguely British voice-over that contrasts Dove’s powers against those of ordinary soap.

The ad is directed to a mass audience of consumers; though it is clear that Dove is a “beauty” bar, and therefore for feminine use, the ad has an otherwise general message to consumers. The ad is not explicitly directed toward any specific types of women—there is no ideal age, or race, or class for this potential consumer. Rather, in connection with current ideologies of mass consumption, it addresses the mass consumer as a unified subject. Yet, there are codes throughout the ad that signal race and class status: the visible

[Image of a 1957 Dove ad, highlighting the soap's cleansing power.]
whiteness of the woman, the luxury of a bubble bath obviously taken in a private home, the cultural capital of the vague British accent. Thus, despite the appeal to the mass consumer (who happens, then as now, to be young, white, and middle-class), the ad nonetheless interpellates the individual consumer through its rhetoric (Dove “creams your skin while you wash”), constructing the relationship between the consumer and the product as one that is deep and highly personal, even as it is simultaneously overgeneralized. In other words, the ad is in fact directed toward a unified subject, one recognized as ideal in the mass-consumption/mass-production era.

As with all cultural meanings, commodities and the structure of marketing and advertising that supports them do not circulate in the same way in different spheres of life. So, while this historical moment is often defined by its homogeneity, the cultural meanings of gender, race, and socioeconomic class shape as well as limit the economization of social spheres. While the dominant image of femininity broadcast in American homes during the 1940s and 1950s resembled the young, white woman in the Dove ad, she was certainly not the only representation. As Lynn Spigel, George Lipsitz, and others have shown, television programs such as *I Love Lucy* and *The Honeymooners* often challenged dominant conceptions of gender and ethnicity through contradictory and alternative representations of female authority. While these representations posed a challenge to dominant forms, they were often subsumed by the new American advertising industry. Alternative media representations thus sat uneasily side by side with the newly built freeways that facilitated “white flight” to the suburbs. The nascent campaigns for sexual freedoms and racial equality occupied the same streets but were contradicted by the hegemony of what Lipsitz has called the “possessive investment in whiteness.” As burgeoning feminist movements began to form in the late 1950s and early 1960s, during that same time the Nixon-Khrushchev Kitchen Debate celebrated abundance and convenience through consumer items (from lipstick to high-heeled shoes to dishwashers) as evidence of freedom and equality within American capitalism.27

Clearly, there were variances within the “consumer republic” of postwar US culture, and different communities used the context of consumerism in diverse ways to express empowerment.28 Those excluded from the hegemonic consumer category, by race, class, or geography, for instance, were “invited” and encouraged through the mass media to aspire to be part of the consumer ideal. Communication technologies, such as the broadcast television on which the Dove commercial appeared, as well as mass-market magazines, in addition to new transportation systems and new patterns of suburban life, were critical to support mass consumption, providing venues for advertising
not only to transmit information to mass audiences about products but also to sell ideologies about the ideal citizen consumer. As advertisers used these new infrastructures to elaborate an image of this citizen consumer, the principles of choice, equality, and freedom were articulated as achievable via consumption. Within US society, these principles as political ideals have indicated exclusion as often as inclusion, so that choice, equality, and freedom are always contingent options, available primarily to those privileged enough to define what choice, equality, and freedom mean. Thus, the political ideals that were connected to consumerism during this era—democracy, freedom, choice, equality, empowerment—were based on a (relatively) homogeneous construction of the consumer. If not always literally white and middle-class, the ideological basis of the ideal consumer was supported by the mass-media technologies of the time and understood within a hegemonic construction of the American citizen, which was, by default, white and middle-class.

Mass production, and its attendant advertising industry, required a certain kind of management of difference so that the purported “free” choice and equality of the consumer citizen could remain intact. These ideologies manifested in the notion of abundance and conformity, so that the working class, people of color, and single parents (groups often confined to America’s cities) were encouraged through ads, media, and marketing to strive to be “just like them”—white, middle-class suburbanites. Advertisers’ concerted efforts to capture a “mass consumer” base required a leveling of racial and gendered differences through the “objectivity” of purchasing power. For example, the Dove ad exemplifies how though the “ideal” consumer was white and middle-class, the commercial and the image it conveyed were flexible enough to be embraced by a larger demographic (or at least aspire to it). While couched in a rhetoric of equality or equal access, needless to say these efforts were also profitable business decisions.

The contradictions within this period of consumer capitalism—what Marx called the ruptures of capitalism—would eventually overwhelm mid-century advertising strategies (though not the insistence on mass production and consumption, which has proved far more durable). Such contradictions—between mass production and its concomitant homogeneity and standardization, dominant political ideologies of the “American dream,” and material and racial inequalities—would just a few decades later form the context for a different era of consumption, the niche market era. Starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, marketers and advertisers capitalized on these contradictions and “resolved” them through different marketing strategies. Indeed, the era of mass production and mass consumption was relatively short-lived. Its idealized image of a homogenized and standardized public
also posed a great challenge to advertisers, as they strove to capture more and more differentiated demographic groups.

The transition from a unified subject targeted by advertising to a more niche-oriented market society can be seen in the era's growing critiques of mass culture. The reimagined links between consumerism and citizenship, and the increasing merging of commercial and political cultures, captured the attention of a generation of postwar intellectuals who, from various political vantage points, critiqued consumer society in general and the prominence of the American consumer in particular. Conservative and progressive intellectuals critiqued the mass audience imagined by the mid-20th-century US culture industries, likening American consumers to unthinking "sheep" and "pseudo-individuals." They often situated their consumption arguments within Marxist frameworks positioning the consumer as passive and manipulable, functioning primarily (if not wholly) in the service of modern capitalism. Intellectuals mourned the loss of the "authentic" individual, an apparent casualty of mass consumerism. These critics largely saw consumer culture as a powerful distraction from rational public discourse, poisoning the spaces of "authentic" democracy, equality, and freedom.

Such intellectual arguments—even if they now seem moralistic, elitist, and nostalgic—by the mid-1960s resonated with emerging protest movements. The feminist and civil rights movements began to see the exclusionary practices of capitalism and consumer society as part of their specific struggles. But at the same time, such criticisms oversimplified the dynamics of production and consumption of mid-20th-century consumer culture. For instance, alongside the mass appeal of ads such as Dove's, beauty product marketing of this era also afforded opportunities for women excluded from representations of the mass consumer. Commercial beauty culture provided a context for reimagining social and political identities even as it simultaneously enforced a dominant femininity.

Obviously, intention at the point of production is not always matched by intention at the point of consumption. Advertisers can, and do, have profit motive as their explicit goal—but consumers and their political ideals, then as now, can challenge and even exceed what advertisers want from them. As I argued in the introduction to this book, it is this excess of meaning that creates consumer (and, later, brand) culture as ambivalent. If the dynamic between producer and consumer is not inevitable, then we can move beyond the standard model—which sees the consumer either as a passive dupe of the brand's desires or as an active resister of these same desires—and instead see the nuances of this relationship between maker and buyer, a relationship often fraught with contradiction.
During the 1940s and 1950s, for instance, African Americans were targeted as niche consumers marked by racial identity and difference, long before the term “niche” came to characterize marketing discourse.35 Some advertisers during the mid-20th century in the US recognized African Americans as potentially lucrative consumers and often used political ideals of equality and freedom in advertising as means through which to attract them and other nonwhite consumers. Walter Mack, the CEO of Pepsi-Cola from 1938 to 1950, was famous for enticing African American consumers and workers to white corporate America; as Stephanie Capparell points out, “When he looked at black, he also saw green.”36 Yet Pepsi-Cola was one of the first US corporations to hire African Americans in professional positions in the 1940s, forcing corporate America to acknowledge the complex issues that revolved around race and work. Consumer culture and political ideals, then, were connected in ways that extended beyond profit motive.

These connections also manifested in a form of consumer advocacy that differed from earlier historical moments, represented in Vance Packard’s book The Hidden Persuaders (1957), which questioned the morality of the advertising industry and suggested that advertisers manipulate the American public into false desires.37 Ralph Nader’s Unsafe at Any Speed, published in 1965, also challenged advertising and consumer culture and argued that automobile manufacturers obfuscated issues of auto safety by focusing on style and comfort. Nader’s crusading clearly struck a chord with an increasingly cynical American public (his book sold more than 400,000 copies in the first years after it was published), and he continued on the consumer advocacy path: in the next several decades he was behind the passage of two dozen consumer protection laws, including the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act, the Consumer Products Safety Act, and the Freedom of Information Act.38 One effect of this kind of advocacy was that consumers began to demand more from advertisers through their role as citizens, using the language of citizenship to insist on their “rights.”39 Both consumers and advertisers reinterpreted the way that 1950s consumer goods were marketed, then, so that the celebratory framing of abundance and convenience of that era became seen as an impediment to individuality and difference.40 These kinds of critiques of consumer culture helped the US cultural economy transition into a liminal period, where there is a challenge to the unified subject of the mass audience and movement toward what would eventually become a fragmented, niche market landscape.

Midcentury consumer capitalism appealed to contradictory interests. The struggle on the part of both consumers and corporate producers to reconcile ideals of citizenship (freedom, equality, democracy) with the seemingly
oppositional ideals of consumerism (individual satisfaction, profit) became particularly acute during this era of mass consumption and production. The unified subject that was the target of advertisers and marketers became increasingly disconnected from the US cultural and political environment in the latter half of the century. Rather than read this disconnect as a failure to adequately market to an audience, the advertising industry saw cultural and individual difference as an opportunity and reimagined its practices to capture an increasingly fragmented audience.

From Mass to Niche: Identity, Difference, and “The Truth” in Late Capitalism

The parceling of identities into markets in the late 1960s and early 1970s, complete with the rhetoric of “you deserve your own [insert artifact—channel, magazine, shop—here]” is a crucial next step in the trajectory that ultimately transitions to neoliberal brand culture and the commodification of social activism. The increasing emergence of niche marketing in the later part of the 20th century in the US had a complex focus: it was in part about recognizing communities (such as the African American or Latina/o communities), but at the same time, niche marketing reified identities into market categories. The double mobilization that characterized US counter-culture, where difference was an important element of politicization and resistance cultures while simultaneously mobilized by consumer capitalism for individuated markets, also made possible niche marketing in the later part of the century.

Niche marketing, in connection with the emergence of identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s, helped to create a new understanding of “authenticity” as a desirable market category. The dominant category of the white, middle-class consumer of the 1950s—the mass audience—rendered a focus on “authentic” identity somewhat irrelevant, as the mass audience did not encourage comparison with others as a way to demonstrate one’s “true” self. The “real” person, rather than a composite generalized consumer, became a dominant representation in advertising in the later part of the 20th century, tapping into a nostalgic longing for authenticity that apparently was missing in the era of mass consumption. Capitalizing on the fragmented market and the emergence of identity politics during this era, Dove in the 1980s created a new ad campaign that departed from the representational politics of the earlier ads, expertly incorporating “feminist criticisms against sexist advertising as well as elements of progressive social change.” The campaign used testimonials from “real” women, who did not tout the product’s
physical properties (e.g., the soap being one-quarter cleansing cream) but focused instead on how using Dove soap helped their "self-esteem." This move from product elements to ideological identity would prove crucial. The real, "authentic" women in the Dove ads gave their names and their testimony to Dove in a conversational, intimate rhetoric—quite different from the earlier male voice-over, blanketing the untouchable woman luxuriating in the bubble bath. Such a move toward "authenticity" was important for connecting female empowerment with consumption, especially beauty products. Dove's new strategy channeled second-wave feminist discourse about how male-dominated society suppressed or repressed women's "true" selves; being an empowered woman meant breaking free from constraint, being yourself. But, of course, Dove also wanted to convince its audience that authenticity is best brought forward through consuming products. Lazar describes how this operates "specifically in terms of a 'true beauty' and essentially 'bold personality' of women all over that make-up helps release (note that the action verbs 'reveal,' 'elevate,' and 'highlights' presupposed pre-existing feminine qualities that are drawn out through empowering cosmetics)." In short, "the pursuit of beauty becomes an extension of the feminist empowerment project."42

Dove maintained its commitment to the "feminist empowerment project" through advertising campaigns across the 1980s that relied on testimonials. In one ad, "Jean Shy" (1988), an African American woman named Jean Shy shares her use of Dove soap, and her reverend's noticing of her skin, with television viewers. Visually, the ad trades on intimacy and friendship; the hand-held camera, the close shots of the woman's face, the obvious home environment all work to give the sense the viewer is sharing a cup of coffee with a friend.

In fact, the ad begins with just that: Jean Shy having a cup of coffee, speaking intimately into the camera, as if in the middle of a conversation: "The other Sunday I went to church, and I wasn't wearing any makeup or anything. And Reverend Walker, he came up to me—cause we know each other really well—and he said, 'Jean, your skin looks really nice.' And I said, 'Well, I've been using Dove.' And he said, 'Well, it must be the Dove!'" Jean Shy laughs, and continues to talk intimately into the camera, sharing beauty "secrets" of Dove soap with viewers and ending with, "And when Reverend Walker gave me that compliment, I loved it." The ad is clearly meant to be a personal and intimate conversation with a real woman, not an actor, who used the product; the connection between Jean Shy as an African American woman and the notion of normative churchgoing (referenced by her familiarity with the reverend) help to position this ad as "authentic."
Other Dove ads during this decade tap into the niche market mentality by focusing on explicitly defined feminine types. A series of ads titled “The Truth” featured “real” women defined by specific characteristics; one profiled women thirty-five years old or older, another focused on “brainy” women, another on women with freckles. Like Jean Shy, each woman speaks into the camera about the “truth” of attaining beauty: older women need certain products to stay beautiful, it’s okay to be smart and pretty, freckles can be sexy. Identity categories that were the center of broader cultural struggles over visibility were easily collapsed into advertising typologies, so that the ads read as “authentic.”

Within Dove’s “Truth” is a larger truth about the shifting strategies of marketers. The ideal of the mass audience no longer held the same kind of profit potential; the focus of late capitalism was on narrow, discrete, and differentiated identities. These identities were presented and marketed as consumer categories—African American, women, gay or lesbian—in a shift that Fredric Jameson called “the death of the subject.”43 The general market that was both created and reflected by advertising became the topic of much intellectual and popular critique, as identity-based political movements gradually gained leverage in American culture.

Though consumer culture was often positioned as part of the white, male establishment against which so many groups protested, it was also consumer culture that provided the context—albeit in a reimagined way—for identity-based movements to articulate political and cultural aims.44 A politicized notion of “difference”—especially in response to what some saw as
the stifling conformity of mass production and consumption—was, in fact,
doubly mobilized. The counterculture, civil rights movement, second-wave
feminist movement, and others mobilized politicized difference in protest,
but advertisers also recognized its flexibility and profitability in the market-
place. During the 1960s and 1970s, resistance to consumer capitalism had a
heightened visibility, as different groups rethought consumerism and created
alternative structures of exchange. As Fred Turner documents, the Whole
Earth network experimented with gift and barter economies, one of many
counterculture efforts to redirect and shape how consumer goods moved
through the counterculture. And, just as advertising continued to capital-
ize on feminine insecurities as a means through which to sell cosmetics, the
1960s and 1970s witnessed a cultural struggle over women’s rights to sexual
pleasure and the emergence of lesbian and other sexual identities. Yet, the
political ideologies seized upon by antiestablishment groups in the 1960s and
1970s—personal expression, equality, freedom—were precisely the kinds of
ideologies that were also commodified and made into markets.

Thus, while being part of a “niche” meant in some ways that one was a
member of a community rather than an individual consumer, the commu-
nity in question was often reified as a market category. Identity-based move-
ments have been properly credited with radically reshaping political culture,
but they have been similarly essential fodder for consumer culture to capital-
ize upon. That is, identity politics and niche markets share an epistemologi-
cal base, but they often move in very different directions from that point; for
instance, the fact that a gay man is targeted as part of the gay male mar-
ket does not mean that man is an engaged participant in marginalized gay
communities.

Counterculture in general was a productive site for both identity poli-
tics and niche marketing. As Gary Cross points out, warnings against the
dangers of co-optation by the establishment became material for clever pro-
motors to create new markets: “Counter-culturalists became rebels through
consumption: tie-dyed dresses, as opposed to cashmere sweaters and pleated
skirts, defined them. The ‘counter’ in the culture was very much within the
confinces of consumerism.” From its beginnings, the counterculture was a
movement deeply entrenched in materialist society and was “intensely entre-
preneurial.” Advertisers during this time changed tactics, and rather than
sell products with the overt message of “buy, because everyone else is, be the
same,” the message shifted to “buy our product, because it is different from
everyone else’s, be ‘real,’ be authentic.” The message to “buy,” of course, did
not change; the value of buying shifted definition, as did the definition of
the ideal consumer. In 1972, for instance, the Ms. Foundation for Women
released *Free to Be... You and Me*, a record album and book that focused on issues of individuality, tolerance, and gender neutrality, which resonated with the decade's popular message to "be yourself." Words such as "peace" and "revolution" were seamlessly incorporated into ads selling products ranging from crude oil to cosmetics; advertising capitalized on the politics of the real and the desire for authenticity as a new vehicle through which to sell products. A Tampax ad in the late 1970s, for example, promoted its product with the tagline "Free to be yourself"; another ad for Sylvania color television in the late 1970s capitalized on the market's growing attention to individual, "real" identities: "Presenting life the way it really is. White people aren't white, black people aren't black, yellow people aren't yellow, brown people aren't brown. Not in real life. Not on Sylvania Color TV." Just as changing forms of citizenship and political subjectivity inform the consumer market and how it addresses its audience(s), so, too, do transformations in consumer capitalism shift modes of citizenship and political subjectivity. Harnessing the now familiar triptych of broad political ideologies—equality, freedom, and democracy—that characterized consumer culture at midcentury, consumer markets used these ideals as a way to both strategize and manage the increasingly public ideologies of "difference" emerging in the cultural economy. Thus, the mass market of the 1950s and early 1960s soon shifted to smaller, more differentiated markets that were mutually exclusive (and thus perpetuated an increasingly dominant understanding of "difference").

In cultural politics, for example, "difference" manifested itself within the politics of visibility—in media, political spheres, and consumer practices alike. Women, African Americans, gays and lesbians, and many other marginalized groups struggled against the exclusionary strategies built into mass production and fought to gain recognition of their discrete identities. Conversations within both academia and the media industries were ignited along the lines of "difference," with considerable attention focused on the visibility of specific identities. Access to and representation on broadcast television became key mobilizing factors in struggles over issues of equality, signaling the importance of media visibility as a conduit for empowerment. Indeed, the emphasis on the power of visibility provided a crucial point of entry for advertisers and marketers, who capitalized on these political struggles, working them into the logics of marketing to create specific niches that directly appealed to narrower groups of consumers based on identity, culture, and lifestyle.

The unity of the subject that had been so important to mass consumption and mass production was no longer always assumed or desired by producers or consumers within late capitalism. Corresponding to changes in culture
at large, subjectivities came to be understood through categories of difference, including race, gender, and sexuality, and a shifted definition of the citizen consumer. This new definition was, like that of the mass consumer, dependent on connecting consumption practices with liberal political ideals. Conflating individual consumption with the citizen consumer was part of advertisers’ broader conflation of liberal ideals of choice and empowerment with consumption habits in the mid-20th century. Such conflation was no less crucial in the later 20th century; the difference, however, came in what and who the citizen consumer was. Consequently, the terms of the producer-consumer relationship changed too, increasingly crafted in relational terms, as an exchange between marketers and consumers rather than a top-down imposition of a corporate message.

Of course, the central goal of advertisers and marketers remained the selling of products. Yet, as I have argued, the meaning that individuals create through consumption often extends beyond this general immediate economic goal, so that the relationship between consumers and producers is often not as predictable as advertisers would like. Both marketers and consumers understand this relationship differently, in other words, which resulted in changing strategies within marketing. For marketers and advertisers, communicating messages to consumers was no longer thought of in a linear, transmission model, with a unified sender and a unified receiver, but rather in an encoding/decoding model, with a more active consumer, who often resented advertising and branding messages.\textsuperscript{54} Rather than imposing a message and hoping for a resultant purchase, advertisers sought to establish a relationship with consumers, the terms of which were based on individual identities and particular “needs.”\textsuperscript{55} Consider the Dove ads of this era in this regard: the intimate conversations with the camera, the confessional quality of the women’s “revelations.” Consumers were thought to have newfound marketing savvy, a skill not lost on advertisers, who created increasingly sophisticated and personalized campaigns.

Alongside shifts in identity formation, new technological and media forms emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s to sell products. For example, cable television tapped into underserved consumer groups, namely, African Americans, children and teens, and women, and promised to directly brand identities through discrete programming niches, with channels such as Black Entertainment Television (BET), Nickelodeon, and Lifetime. The emergence and increased installation of cable television technology in the American home during the 1970s were positioned and celebrated by the industry, as well as consumers, in terms of cable’s difference from broadcast television (though the true explosion in discrete channel niches would not occur until
the 1980s). Cable could be a venue for “individual creativity” in juxtaposition to broadcast TV’s “mass conformity.” Cable, it seemed, could offer less “lowest-common-denominator” and crassly commercialized programming, less intrusive advertising, more viewer interactivity, and more viewer empowerment in terms of choice. In particular, cable’s increased number of channels tapped into the growing public discourse about “difference,” emerging identity politics, and the rejection of postwar homogeneity. In fact, the cable industry proved to be a particularly profitable site for new niche markets and the commodification of identities. As Joseph Turow describes, cable television offered a place for advertisers’ cultivation of “primary media communities,” groups of consumers sought in order to nurture brand loyalty against a progressively more cluttered media landscape.

Despite efforts to separate them ideologically, the new “primary media communities” of the 1970s and more overtly political, identity-based communities were not mutually exclusive. Political struggles over visibility and voice, for instance, did not merely motivate change in cultural values in the 1970s and 1980s but also were exploited by the mainstream commercial media. One of the rallying issues of the social and cultural upheavals of later 20th-century US culture was a perceived lack of “mattering” in contemporary culture: the values and standards that seemed to signify the “American way” were woefully out of touch with (and often literally beyond the reach of) those groups fighting to have their voices heard. Struggles for visibility were one response to this: being seen was a step toward inclusion and cultural significance. Cable channels positioned themselves as a more inclusive, more individual answer to Newton Minow’s famous “vast wasteland” of broadcast television, cultivating a sense of belonging and a notion of community. Cable channels were often designed to capture an undermarketed part of broadcast television’s viewership and were heralded as an important factor in recognizing audiences broadcast television had historically obscured. Cable, that is, capitalized on struggles over visibility and “solved” these struggles by offering niche channels. Such recognition is crucial in a media society that often equates social power with visibility, but it is a limiting visibility that also works to commodify identities within boundaries established by communication industries. Additionally, niche marketing has the tendency to marginalize distinct groups, identifying them as so different from the mainstream as to, for example, deserve their own channel.

This worked to render these groups (such as kids or African Americans) as distinct and closed, implying that they have no relationship to each other. The result is not a harmonious multichannel, multicultural media universe but one in which a host of niche channels stand in their discrete corners,
while the mainstream audience channels continue to dominate the stage and define norms of representation.59

Certainly the segmented market and its focus on individual identities can be celebrated as a beneficial response to the exclusive (white, middle-class) homogeneity of mid-20th-century mass markets. Yet, transforming identity into a product and a market has enormous consequences. Commodifying identity reifies it. Commodities like gender or race become hegemonically constructed things rather than relational, intersectional qualities that are constantly subject to reinvention. Writing about the success of the cable channel BET, Beretta Smith-Shumade points out how, “on a scale never seen prior, BET promotes and presents African-Americans as a product. It sells black folks like any other merchandise—pop, detergent, or shoes.”60 While surely there are other historical dynamics that construct African Americans as products, Smith-Shumade’s point is that a television channel dedicated to this practice furthers the commodification of identity as the norm. She also points to a now quite obvious dynamic of television (and other media industries): television not only serves programming to audiences but also serves audiences to advertisers, thus literally commodifying viewers. Audiences, within capitalist media industries, are not only the targets for products; they are the product, and they are both of these things simultaneously.

A corollary dynamic is found in advertising’s deployment of commodity feminism.61 Like the commodification of race, transforming the politics of feminism into a product to be sold means to reify feminism (and, through feminism, women)—to make identity into a kind of thing. Concepts of empowerment and choice are threaded through the commercial address, making it more complicated to tease out differences between and within women (let alone make the determination that these differences do, in fact, make a difference). As Lazar points out, “The appropriation of feminism especially by the advertising media is hardly surprising given that advertisers are adept at reading and responding to the signs of the time....They are able to assimilate feminist criticisms against sexist advertising as well as elements of progressive social change.”62

During the 1970s and 1980s, consumer capitalism in the US moved from a focus on product efficiency to a more affective relationship with consumers, evidence that advertisers are indeed “adept at reading and responding to the signs of the time.” This affective relationship is defined by advertisers’ acknowledgment of identity differences, which allowed them to position “authenticity” as a key component of the relationship. The consumer-producer relationship became one of exchange, modeled after the principles of encoding/decoding, rather than a simple transmission of information. It also
marked an emphasis on marketing "real" identities as an attempt to disrupt the increasingly public discourse about the manipulation and inauthenticity of advertising. Mobilizing the authentic, "real" consumer enabled the subsequent forging of a relationship between consumer and producer that is now central to the neoliberal strategy of building culture within the structures of branding and marketing.

"Real" Relationships and Neoliberal Branding as Culture

Clearly, the era of niche marketing, and the subsequent fragmenting and commodifying of identities, has not come to an end. However, the contemporary era needs to be theorized as more than an expanded development of niche marketing. While there are residual elements within advanced capitalist consumer culture that overlap with other periods of consumer culture, there are also profound differences.

The cultural economy of advanced capitalism, ever more rapid innovations in technologies and user interactivity, and the explosion of brand culture have shaped a commodity activism quite different than consumer cultures of the 1950s and 1960s, or even the 1970s and 1980s. The late 20th and early 21st centuries ushered in advanced or neoliberal capitalism, an environment that among other things enables a kind of brand strategy in its production of goods, services, and resources. These advanced capitalist dynamics manage, contain, and actually design identities, difference, and diversity as brands. Brand cultures facilitate "relationships" between consumers and branders and encourage an affective connection based on authenticity and sincerity.

The contemporary era is one that focuses on the individual entrepreneur, "free" to be an activist, a consumer, or both. This newly imagined entrepreneur is not defined in the traditional sense of being a business owner or investor, but rather is an entrepreneur of the self, a category that has exclusive hints to it but also gains traction as something that ostensibly can apply to anyone. At the same time, digital technologies and other media have also facilitated the emergence of "networked publics," where networks between individuals help form collective communities, such as those revolving around feminist, gay, or environmental issues, to name but a few. The relationship between the individual entrepreneur and networked publics is structured by an ambivalence that is critical to the operation of brand culture. Brand cultures are not merely an economic strategy but are cultural spaces and often difficult to predict and characterize precisely. The tension between a neoliberal focus on the individual entrepreneur and the continuing demands of
collective cultures is one that runs through brand culture and shapes commodity activism. The individual entrepreneur is encouraged to participate in collective action through brands like Dove, just as citizens have been encouraged throughout US history to exercise civic behavior such as voting and organizing (some citizens far more than others, of course). The contemporary moment, however, is characterized by the fact that brand culture profit will always trump collective politics and social issues, so that these same collective politics are authorized by the brand itself. It is this tension, among other things, that characterizes marketing in the early 21st century.

In other words, if marketing in the mid-20th century was primarily about mass, homogeneous audiences, and in the later 20th century about niches and authenticity, in the early 21st century it is about increasingly elaborate relationships between producers and consumers through the principle of "engagement." The trick for contemporary marketers is how to create engagement that feels authentic while still privileging market exchange. As I argued in the introduction to this book, these two practices can seem incompatible. Social economist Viviana Zelizer has pointed out, "Market exchange, although perfectly compatible with the modern values of efficiency and equality, conflicts with human values that defy its impersonal, rational, and economizing influence." How to manage or contain this conflict in the contemporary era? As many marketers have relayed to me, an increasingly normative way to address the tension that comes with marketing human values is through "engagement." Marketer Denise Shiffman argues that creating products and brands in the 21st century US market necessitates building a kind of affective, authentic engagement into the product itself: "The goal is to create your own space, attract your own audience, and develop a deep and long-lasting relationship with customers. When you do this, your product will rise above the din of marketing messages."

Consider the way Dove tries to rise "above the din" with its current ad campaign. The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty website, launched in 2004 by Ogilvy & Mather, expanded on the "authenticity" of its ads in the 1970s and 1980s. Part advertising, part pedagogy, part social activism — and made legible through brand culture — this campaign capitalized and built upon the consumer-producer relationship as the privileged identity of the neoliberal cultural economy. As a part of the website and a concurrent billboard campaign, Dove featured images of "real, everyday" women. Taglines asked consumers whether the woman pictured was "Fat/fabulous?" or "Withered/wonderful?" Consumers were invited to text in their "vote" for the best choice, with results displayed in real time, encouraging consumer participation in the development of the campaign. (In the Toronto campaign, 51
percent of consumers voted for “fat” in the choice between “fat” or “fabulous,” perhaps giving even more empirical evidence to Dove to continue its quest for healthy self-esteem.) Ostensibly empowered by “choice,” consumers were asked to vote for the not-so-subtle correct answer—“wonderful,” “fabulous”—even in a brand context that has historically not only supported but created an entire industry around “fat” and “withered” as problems women need to address. With the click of a mouse, or the tap of a screen, female consumers cast a vote and become citizens in the Dove nation; through their consumer-generated content, they help build the brand.

The “real” women Dove targeted were now not simply media representations but also consumers who helped produce the ads. Indeed, the current manifestation of the Dove campaign utilizes new technology and social media, from uploading videos on YouTube, to texting votes, to signing up for workshops online. Dove’s campaign has also capitalized on a broader postfeminist cultural milieu in which, among other things, girls and women are encouraged to empower themselves through consumption practices, heightened visibility, and self-improvement.67 Dove, through its messages of self-empowerment and the importance of building self-esteem, builds upon and reroutes the work that feminists have been doing for generations: helping women free themselves from restraint, having a voice, taking action in the world. This rerouting takes shape on the platform of the brand; Dove certainly did not invent discourses of female self-empowerment, but the company does retool these discourses in the service of brand culture and commodity activism. The combination of these practices authorizes the consumer activist as a participant in, and ambassador for, both female empowerment and the Dove brand.

To wit, and furthering this participatory aim, soon after the campaign began, the brand launched a subsidiary initiative, the Dove Self-Esteem Fund, to address eating disorders and other issues among young women and girls. The pedagogical function of the campaign—educating women and girls on how to have “healthy self-esteem”—is an important element in the Dove campaign. Tapping into the blurry boundaries between consumer and producer, the Dove workshops imply that consumers not only are helping produce ads but are also charged with producing a better, healthier gender culture.68 Thus, Dove positions itself as both the tool and platform through which women and girls can become not just individually empowered but also social activists.

Consumers can, then, participate in Dove online workshops and download “free self-esteem tools.” The workshops provided on the website, which offer videos of workshops actually done in person as templates,
participants to think through questions and perform activities as a way to strengthen self-esteem. (Once a participant has completed three tools, she can “receive [her] very own self-esteem certificate,” which thus acquires symbolic use-value for Dove consumer citizens.) The “self-esteem tools” include “True You!” workbooks that offer “simple self-esteem exercises for moms and girls to do together” that are guides to “help your daughter feel more beautiful.”

The Dove campaign also includes “You’re the Editor!,” which offers tips for girls to create their own magazines, and a mother-daughter activity, “Boost Book,” in which the participants are asked to “decorate a notebook or sketchpad together and keep a log of inspiring quotations, compliments and positive comments other people have made about the girl in your life…. Whenever she has a moment of uncertainty, bring out the book to get her self-esteem back on track.” If users would rather participate in a workshop in person, one can sign up for the National Workshop Tour (through which apparently 3,308,796 “lives have been touched to date”). The company
commissioned a report, *Real Girls, Real Pressure: A National Report on the State of Self-Esteem*, inviting consumers to “play a role in supporting and promoting a wider definition of beauty.” The emphasis of the rhetoric on the individual consumer—“You’re the Editor!,” “play a role,” “True You”—directs attention away from the role that capitalism in general and the beauty industry in particular have played in creating low female self-esteem, but also in the simultaneous creation of a market to help combat this issue. Indeed, on the same web page that offers “free self-esteem tools” are advertisements for Dove products, such as Dove Body Wash, which apparently gives its users a “nourishing boost,” as well as an appeal to consumers to “try new Dove Daily Treatment Conditioners free!” Another, for Dove Beauty Bar, has the tagline “Just because the economy is drying up, it doesn’t mean your skin should. With Dove Beauty Bar, beautiful skin is still affordable.” These ads imply that larger social and economic problems—indeed, crises—need not be of concern as long as one attempts individual beauty. Or perhaps more precisely, that dismantling global issues that affect women is as easy as choosing the right face wash. It is difficult, in obvious ways, to reconcile the cultural work performed by Dove beauty products, which are created for women and girls to more closely approximate a feminine ideal, with the Dove Real Beauty workshops, with the campaign's invitations for consumer participation, and with its critique of the beauty industry.

But a seemingly impossible reconciliation is precisely the cultural work that postfeminism and commodity activism excel at. Moreover, reconciling consumption and social change is not a contradiction within brand culture but instead follows a political logic. This logic is neither objective nor neutral; rather, it is one strategy of advanced capitalism, where the logic of product differentiation allows Dove to relay feminist critiques of the beauty industry while at the same time deflecting those same critiques from Dove onto other brands. This deployment of feminist discourse structures the Dove brand culture as ambivalent, where the promise of feminist goals is held simultaneously with the logic of market exchange. Through brand culture, feminism is incorporated as part of the market; through brand culture, both the market and feminism itself are transformed.

Dove's repertoire of viral films has expanded since “Evolution”; another Dove viral video, “Onslaught,” depicts a torrent of media images of distorted and unrealistic femininity seen through the eyes of an innocent white girl. The tagline reads, “Talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does.” Another, “Amy,” portrays a young girl who refuses to meet a boy because she has such low self-esteem. Its tagline: “Amy can name 12 things wrong with her appearance. He can't name one.” As a way to further individualize this
ad (after all, the boy—and by extension, masculine culture—apparently has nothing to do with Amy's low self-esteem), the video also invites viewers to insert their name in place of "Amy," thereby personalizing the representation. Dove's goal, it seems, is to make low self-esteem an individual problem, thereby emphasizing the distinction between all girls who suffer from low self-esteem and the personal suffering of the individual consumer citizen. The personalization privileges individual experience over systemic problems.

The Dove campaign is one example of a contemporary way of making culture that is dependent on the brand as a context for its production. In other words, brands, such as Dove, provide the context, or what Adam Arvidsson would call the "ambience," for the lived experience of culture. Brand cultures are spaces in which politics are practiced, identities are made, art is created, and cultural value is deliberated. The Dove campaign is not simply about the acquisition of beauty knowledge (such as how to put on makeup or how to lose weight) that can be explained relatively easily as corporate appropriation of a kind of feminist pedagogy, or conversely, what might be expected from a beauty supply company. Rather, it is about creating and supporting a shifted manifestation of the citizen consumer, one who is critical of marketing and its unrealistic norms and is invited to develop this narrative in conjunction with corporate culture (and alongside the buying of beauty products).

The consumer coproduction at the heart of Dove's campaign reflects a labor practice characteristic of advanced capitalism in the early 21st century. Consumers contribute specific forms of production via voting, creating videos for the campaign, workshopping, and so forth, but the forms of their labor are generally not recognized as labor (e.g., participating in media production, DIY practices, consumer-generated content). This immaterial labor is defined by the Italian Marxist Maurizio Lazzarato as "the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity." This kind of consumer labor does two rather contradictory things simultaneously: it both tightens the hold of the corporation over the consumer (in that the consumer is now performing labor with no compensation) and also reveals the contradictions within the structure of "informationalized capitalism," by loosening some of the control from the corporation as far as determining the final product. In the context of the Dove campaign, the "cultural content" of immaterial labor produces affect, "healthy self-esteem," and gender identity. Obviously, the impulses of affect and gendered self-esteem existed before the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, just as critiques of the beauty industry already existed within feminism. The practices of Web 2.0, however, seek to corral these impulses as part of broad consumer capitalism. Again,
the transition to advanced capitalism and brand culture is not a teleological one, based in a linear history.

It is easy to accuse Dove of hypocrisy, and indeed, bloggers and cultural critics alike already have. After all, the company is utilizing the immaterial labor of participants for material gain—and to profit an industry, no less, that helped further the problem these participants are protesting. Immaterial labor, that is, emerges from the expansion of neoliberal cultural economies and is “part of a process of economic experimentation with the creation of monetary value out of knowledge/culture/affect.” However, this Dove campaign is not an insidious, manipulative attempt by advertisers to disrupt and co-opt an “authentic” formation of gender identity. It is a campaign that builds the Dove brand by “engaging” consumers and building “authentic” relationships with these consumers as social activists. Indeed, the Dove campaign is but one example from the contemporary marketing landscape that demonstrates the futility of a binary understanding of culture as authentic versus commercial. To accuse the campaign of hypocrisy implies that non-hypocritical activities within capitalism (of which there are many, as capitalist practices are often quite bold about their motives and operations) are somehow nonexploitative. Brand culture is structured by ambivalence. Yet this does not deny the presence of power relations as a critical element in their formation. As Manuel Castells argues:

It would be tempting to play with words and characterize the transformation of power in the network society as a shift from the ownership of the means of production to the ownership of the means of communication since, as some theorists propose, we have shifted from the production of goods to the production of culture. This is indeed an elegant proposition but it leaves us hanging in a discourse without precise reference to the actual dramas of power struggles in our world.44

The “actual dramas of power struggles in our world” have a role in the production and maintenance of brand cultures such as Dove, but not in the sense of the hypocrisy of the campaign, which implies that profit somehow trumps all other concerns. The perceived hypocrisy apparently embodied by Dove’s parent company, Unilever, is actually not at all hypocritical given a context in which culture is a commodity and a resource made available for capitalization, and in which identities take on meaning at the precise moment they are recognized as market categories. Mark Andrejevic, in his work on participatory culture in Web 2.0 technologies, argues that the consumer empowerment promised by the openness and flexibility of new
technologies needs to be understood as a coexistence between creative activity and exploitation. The labor of Dove consumers is unacknowledged labor and, like all forms of labor, is exploitative. However, the practices of Web 2.0, as Andrejevic reminds us, exploit in a specific way. The labor of Dove consumers is also immaterial labor, work that produces affective relationships, and a form of creative knowledge. This creative knowledge is one that expands the flexibility (and consequently the ambivalence) of the brand itself. The labor of Dove consumers is ambivalent, about both creative activity and exploitation simultaneously: as a brand culture, the Dove consumer community expresses and validates both of these possibilities.

Within advanced capitalism, connections between consumerism and citizenship do not need to be justified or qualified. In the era of mass consumption, such connections had to be sold by advertisers (so that buying a product was crafted as a choice afforded by democratic freedoms); in the 1970s and 1980s such connections had to be justified by market segmentations (as identities became products like any other material good, marketers could naturalize the position of politics with commercialism, or citizenship with consumption, as a relationship). However, the consumer citizen is the central category of analysis for today's advanced capitalist culture. Individual freedoms are guaranteed not by the state or another institution but by the freedom of the market and of trade.

An exploration of neoliberal brand culture reveals its overlaps and interrelationships with earlier historical consumer cultural formations and also its vast differences. Thus, the emphasis on “mass” in the earlier era of mass production and consumption and the focus on identity groups in the niche market era have been redefined as an emphasis on the “particular” (though of course enabled by the persistence of mass production). Within this economic and discursive context, systems of production and distribution that respond to smaller groups of consumers are framed within the cultural context of “individualism,” “choice,” and “freedoms.” While niche marketing also capitalized on these concepts for marketing, in the neoliberal era they are reimagined to even more relentlessly focus on an individual person, one who has access to customized products and can become an entrepreneur of the self. The fact that these ideals continue to be shaped and defined by advertising and branding strategies is not contradictory; rather, politics and consumerism, advertising and art, individualism and entrepreneurship all become the contours of culture.

One significant contour of culture within this contemporary moment is a change from production of capital to the actual production of culture itself. George Yudice, in The Expediency of Culture, argues that “the role of culture
has expanded in an unprecedented way into the political and economic at
the same time that conventional notions of culture largely have been emptied
out. Limiting his focus to political economy, Yüdice is not concerned with
what he calls the “content” of culture. He is interested in “the question of
culture in our period, characterized as one of accelerated globalization, as a
resource. . . . Culture is increasingly wielded as a resource for both sociopo-

citcal and economic amelioration, that is, for increasing participation in this
era of waning political involvement, conflicts over citizenship, and the rise
of what Jeremy Rifkin has called ‘cultural capitalism.’”78 In “cultural capi-

talism” more traditional forms of markets (such as those in operation in the
mass-consumption or niche market eras) are replaced by a logic of networks,
access, and affective economic relationships.79 The “production of culture”
within networked, capitalist society and the shift from production to com-

munication is one in which, instead of “monetary” capital or the production
of goods as driving forces, “concepts, ideas, and images—not things—are the
real items of value in the new economy.”80 The production of culture also
means that the expanding participation of consumers in this economy indi-
cates a possibility for reshaping those concepts, ideas, and images—that is,
culture has significance beyond materialism. Yet at the same time it becomes
increasingly difficult to separate culture from materialism, or materialism
from culture, as they are imbricated with each other.

Today’s shifted role of culture as an item of value, produced through
and within capitalist industries, has resulted in what Rifkin calls the “age of
access.”81 Questions of access structure our relationships with not only capi-
talism but also other individuals. The Internet’s most significant debates are
no longer only about ownership of goods but about access to goods and
their supporting production practices. Importantly, such debates evidence
not a narrowing of the role of culture in society but an expansion. Within
advanced capitalism, brand strategies and management are situated not as
economic principles or good business but as the affective stuff of culture.
Rather than insert brands into existing culture, brand managers use the emo-
tive relationships we all have with material things, with products, with con-
tent, and seek to build culture around those brands.

Marketers talk incessantly of “engagement,” new branches of advertising
and marketing firms are devoted to using social media as a way to authen-
tically interact with consumers, and marketers in general are strategizing
how to “engage” consumers as a way of recouping a loosening of control
over messaging. It is this “engagement,” rather than any top-down work
by brand managers themselves, that does the building of brand culture. As
many brand marketers explained to me, branding strategies need to focus
on affective, authentic relationships between consumers and producers, and
to build culture out of these relationships. Additionally, brand cultures
need to be built "organically" with the authentic participation of consumers.
Within brand culture, consumers produce identity, community, emotional
attachments, affective practices, and relationships both with the brand and
with each other; in turn, brand culture—not to mention the products of
those brands—provides an infrastructure for this kind of social and political
behavior.

As the consumer builds emotive relationships within brand culture, her
work is enabled by media technologies and applauded by their surrounding
rhetoric of empowerment. This infrastructure includes the various commu-
nication and technological apparatuses that have sustained, facilitated, and
enhanced U.S. consumer culture historically not only by providing crucial
platforms for marketing messages and images but also by offering cultural
and political contexts that animate shifting versions of the consumer citizen.
As I have described, in the era of mass consumption, broadcast television
and mass magazines were two technologies crucial in constructing (and thus
gendering and racializing) an imagined national consumer. When the stan-
dardized, mass consumer was challenged by political and cultural upheav-
als, emerging identity politics, and a focus on "difference," emerging media
and new technology formats such as cable television and niche markets
facilitated the transition. Now, in the contemporary era, the expansion of
the digital economy, the rejuvenation of DIY forms of cultural production,
the hegemony of brand culture, and other forms of new media have revised
the consumer citizen as a specific kind of activist. Clearly there are impor-
tant differences between these eras, and the flexibility between consumption
and production that characterizes the contemporary moment may well pave
the way for new forms of resistance to consumer culture. Nevertheless, like
the other historical moments discussed in this chapter, the current nexus of
political economies, technologies, and shifting formations of identity harness
political ideals such as "freedom" and "empowerment" as motivating factors
in establishing hegemonic dominance.

In particular, the current glamorization of the consumer-producer is
important to consider when theorizing the empowerment of the contempo-
rary consumer citizen. The blurring of boundaries between consumer-produ-
culer so celebrated in Web 2.0 discourse is often cited as a tipping point in
the formation of individual subjectivity from a passive consumer to an active
subject. The celebration of this boundary collapse, especially in the rhetoric
of advertising and marketing, hinges upon the notion of the disruption of
the traditional top-down delivery of information, from powerful producer to
passive consumer. Consumers are afforded greater latitude and freedom than ever before to produce individually meaningful material. This also represents the “freedom” to engage in immaterial labor. Fixed distinctions between “production and consumption, labor and culture” are questioned and denaturalized, and the resulting space opened up becomes the space of individual empowerment. 83 Celebratory rhetoric about this new consumer-producer, coming from profit-seeking advertisers and marketers, enables a brand, such as Dove, to entreat its consumers to “download your free self-esteem tools.” 84

What, exactly, is the consumer producing? Arvidsson’s work on brands is useful here; he points out that contemporary brands enable consumers in different ways and toward different ends than traditional forms of advertising that imposed messages on consumers. Brands engage with consumers in a context of “freedom,” whereby consumers are expected to have a say in the coproduction of brands. 85 The consumer “empowerment” afforded by brands is one that is at least partly the product of the immateriality of brands; they enable the coproduction of an experience with consumers rather than dictate an already determined experience for consumers. More than that, the relationship brand companies cultivate with their consumers is one defined not by consumer purchase as much as it is by identity construction and validation. As such, brand cultures shift the very notion of cultural value. 86 Generating profit does not necessarily mean there is no community, that the “freedom” to participate in culture never does anything but produce individually, rather than collectively, meaningful material. Rather, a tension or ambivalence is produced between the individual entrepreneur and activist and the increasing presence of networked publics, both animated by advanced capitalism. In the 21st century, this tension and its underlying ambivalence underscore efforts both to create a sense of self in the branded world and to establish a sense of community.

The Compromise of Cultural Capitalism

Following Terranova’s logic, I am not proposing that our current moment represents a logical progression in consumer culture, whereby one cultural economy has plausibly transformed to the next. Rather, I am proposing that the contemporary cultural economy both embodies and materializes a different logic of value, one that provides a fertile context for the emergence of brand culture and a specific definition of commodity activism. I try to resist overemphasizing either the incorporation of individual subjectivities by advanced capitalism or the autonomy of the consumer citizen within this economy. Terranova sees the contemporary context as one based “in
a difficult, experimental compromise between the historically rooted cultural and affective desire for creative production [and] the current capitalist emphasis on knowledge as the main source of value-added.” It is important that contemporary culture be understood as a compromise rather than a dichotomy or a binary. It disrupts the theoretical paralysis of binary thinking—as in the critique of Dove’s Real Beauty campaign as hypocritical—and allows for rethinking the consumer-as-empowered-citizen, emphasizing the ambivalence and contradictions of the current context rather than explaining these qualities away as insignificant outliers.

It should not then come as a surprise that, within advanced capitalist culture, social activism is understood and experienced as a material good, as an object that has exchange value with other products. Like other identities, such as race and gender, the social activist in its current manifestation is managed, organized, and exchanged not simply as a commodity but as a brand. And, like other manifestations of marketing and advertising in recent US history, political ideals such as social equality, freedom, and empowerment are realized through the practices of consumption and consumer citizenship. Furthermore, when current identities are configured as “posts” (as in postfeminist, postracial, or post-Fordist), older political paradigms that once mobilized social activism no longer have the same cultural or economic capital; their community-centered struggles are easier to dismiss, their community-won victories easier to ignore. The central subjectivity within advanced capitalism is now the individual entrepreneur, working on his or her own in a radically “free” market.

The activist in neoliberal culture can be anyone (another of its utopic promises), as long as she or he is willing to shift from social to commodity activism, and as long as brand culture supports and sustains that activism. Indeed, contemporary marketers deploy new strategies as a way to both recognize and exploit these changing identities, resulting in an increasingly more sophisticated and complicated exchange between the consumer and the brand. When Dove criticizes the beauty industry for damaging girls’ self-esteem through a very visible, social activist campaign that is funded through the selling of beauty products, the relationship between political (read: individual) empowerment and consumer culture is intricately, and often ambivalently, configured within the contours of the brand.

It thus makes sense to think about this exchange as at least partly a result of the contradictions within advanced capitalism and to consider this relation as a strain of ambivalence. Rather than lingering on the various ways in which contemporary brand culture is flush economically, politically, and culturally but lacking in morality or ethics, we need to critically interrogate the
concepts that have been historically used to distinguish between commercial culture and political citizenship, such as consumer and producer, or brand manager and activist. This interrogation needs to begin with an understanding of brand cultures as cultures writ large—not as purely a form of individualism, or personalization. Terranova’s idea of compromise, between creativity and capitalism, between affect and profit, requires that we understand what exactly is being compromised, and what consumers gain as well as lose through such transactions.

What is at stake is not simply revisiting these terms to theorize what place they might hold in a cultural debate about the making of identity. A new conceptualization of these terms and the contradictions between them is needed as a way to account for changing practices of cultural production and identity formation within a shifting economy. The mechanisms of capitalism have indeed addressed inequalities between certain groups of consumers. Yet, the logic of market capitalism is that it often masks inequalities while simultaneously claiming to address and alleviate them. This masking is never complete; its contradictions are visible in the context of other social and cultural forces, such as social activist movements, consumer advocacy, and self-empowerment. The market is always a possibility and a refusal, but the nature of its possibilities and kinds of refusals depend on the larger cultural context of technology, politics, and the construction of individual identity. In brand culture, with its attendant Web 2.0 technologies for consumer-generated content and DIY production, the outgrowths of neoliberalism’s radically “free” markets are knowledge and affect—the stuff of identity—as well as culture itself.
NOTES TO INTRODUCTION


2. The film received critical acclaim, winning the Prix Kodak at the Cannes Film Festival in 2009 and the award for Best Animated Short Film at the Eighty-Second Academy Awards in 2010.


4. The research in this book involved talking to marketers, advertisers, and brand managers and investigating new forms of brand strategies tailored to the early 2000s in the US. Over the past four years, I have interviewed people specifically involved in “engagement marketing” to youth cultures, a form of marketing that extends beyond conventional advertising into new technologies (such as YouTube videos and Facebook pages), different genres (such as creating CD compilations for radio stations and short DVDs on popular cultural events), and one that relies heavily on consumer-generated content. My interviews were not limited to engagement marketers, however. I also interviewed brand marketers who were recruited to brand cities and discussed with them the various practices involved in creating urban environments around the logic of branding (such as “theming” cities as particular kinds of places—who knew that Phoenix is a “desert oasis”?).

   I directed a research group with a focus on branding over three years, where we had a variety of brand marketers come to talk to the group about what branding looks like in the contemporary moment. I also conducted a mini-ethnography, in which I “worked” at a major advertising firm in Los Angeles for two weeks and interviewed marketers and branders from leadership to entry-level employees. And, over the course of the past four years, I participated in dozens of seminars, meetings, and focus groups at the Annenberg School at the University of Southern California with branders and marketers regarding new practices of marketing in 21st-century culture.


|| 223

10. Ibid.


15. Political action within brand cultures is inconsistent and often unpredictable, and individual acts of political participation in brand cultures do not necessarily result in cultural resistance. As Stephen Duncombe points out, it is tricky to conflate the consumer use of products—even the “right” use of products—with resistance: “There is a big difference between rereading reality and acting to make it anew. To not recognize this distinction is to confuse the everyday action of making meaning with the much rarer tasks of creation and transformation.” Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: New Press), 15. Marketers are quick, of course, to capitalize on resistance through commodifying it, as Duncombe points out.


17. Consider culture in the way of Williams, as the conjunction of two understandings: “to mean a whole way of life—the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning—the special processes of discovery and creative effort.” See Raymond Williams, “Culture Is Ordinary,” in *Conviction*, ed. Norman MacKenzie (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1958), 5–6. Culture is “ordinary,” Williams insisted, the process and production of everyday life, of individual and collective experience. It is also, as Vicki Mayer reminds us, “a sense of place, its physicality and material environment [and] each place has a history, shaped by struggles over resources and authority.” See Vicki Mayer, “My Media Studies, Fifty Years Later,” *Television & New Media* 10, no. 1 (2009): 103. Williams, advocating a neo-Marxist concept of “cultural materialism,” argued that “a culture must be finally interpreted in relation to its underlying system of production.” However, Williams disagreed with Marx in his point that “since culture and production are related, the advocacy of a different system of production is in some way a cultural directive, indicating not only a way of life but new arts and learning” (8).

18. Examining the contemporary moment, in other words, means that we need to, as James Scott has eloquently pointed out, understand how neoliberalism authorizes not just corporate institutions and governments but also individuals to “see like a state.” James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). As Judith Halberstam has pointed out, “For Scott, to ‘see like a state’ means to accept the order of things and to internalize them; it means that we begin to deploy and
think with the logic of the superiority of orderliness and it means we erase and
indeed sacrifice other more local practices of knowledge, practices, moreover,
that may be less efficient, may yield less marketable results, but may also, long
term, be more sustaining.” See Judith Halberstam, “Beyond Broadway and Main:
But, importantly, the neoliberal context is also a broader set of ideologies that
allows for what Jacques Ranciere calls a “distribution of the sensible,” where “see-
ing like a state” within neoliberalism is conceived of precisely in antistate terms,
where what is considered “sensible” is understanding the state as the enemy of the
people and privileging the individual as the central interlocutor in all areas of life,
and where those practices that “may be less efficient, may yield less marketable
results” are positioned as the opposite of the sensible, indeed, as pure nonsense.

19. David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2005), 3.

Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discourse on the Origin
of Inequality (New York: CreateSpace, 2010); Henry David Thoreau, Walden,
see Daniel Miller, Stuff (London: Polity Press, 2009), and Andrew Potter, The
for discussions.

21. As Webb Keane notes about Thoreau’s concept of the authentic, “For Thoreau,
the distinction between inner and outer provides ontological support for his
individualism, which sees in social relations a threat to personal authenticity. For
both Thoreau and Marx, despite their obvious political differences, the misap-
prehension of material things is not merely a mistake—it has grave consequences.
It leads us to invert our values, imputing life to the lifeless and thereby losing our-
selves.” Webb Keane, “Signs Are Not the Garb of Meaning: On the Social Analysis
of Material Things,” in Materiality, edited by Daniel Miller (Durham, NC: Duke
University Press, 2006), 184. Andrew Potter similarly notes that for Rousseau,
“Commerce is itself an intrinsically alienating form of social interaction because
it takes the direct and natural relation of mutual esteem and replaces it with
relationships mediated by stuff. Because commercial transactions are motivated
entirely by the desire for private gain, human contact becomes thoroughly instru-

22. Lury, Brands.

23. Klein, No Logo.

24. For more on guerrilla marketing, see Michael Serazio’s “Your Ad Here: The
Cool Sell of Guerrilla Marketing” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2010).

25. Klein, No Logo; Kalle Lasn, Culture Jam: How to Reverse America’s Suicidal Con-
sumer Binge—And Why We Must (New York: William Morrow, 1999); Juliet Schor,

27. Serazio, "Your Ad Here," 296.


30. Following the lead of social anthropologist Daniel Miller, I resist the (traditional Marxist) idea that material brand culture necessarily mystifies and obscures real relationships between people, arguing instead that relationships between people are often made possible by our relationship with branded commodities (or what Miller calls, more generally, "stuff"). Miller says about the relationship between subjects (individuals) and objects (commodities): "Material culture matters because objects create subjects rather than the other way around...the closer our relationships with objects, the closer our relationships with people." Miller, Materiality, 7. Miller makes a philosophical argument about material culture; I similarly argue that commodities do not circulate in the same way in different spheres of life, and that these different patterns of circulation mean that individuals establish relationships with commodities in different ways.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. A viral video is a film clip that gains popularity through the process of Internet sharing, typically through email or blogs or other media-sharing websites. It has different meanings depending on who is using the term: for instance, marketers often strategize to create campaigns as “viral,” so that consumers can circulate advertising messages among themselves. Consumers often circulate messages as “viral” to circumvent marketers.

3. Aside from viewers sharing the video, it has received more than 3 million hits on YouTube.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid. See also Toby Miller, The Well-Tempered Self: Citizenship, Culture, and the Postmodern Subject (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
10. "Dove Campaign for Real Beauty."
13. Lazar, "Entitled to Consume."
15. de Grazia and Furlough, Sex of Things, 4.
17. Ibid., 209.
18. Thus, cosmetics were sold to US women as accoutrements of not only femininity but also national identity: "Clothes and cosmetics helped immigrant women define themselves as 'American' and enabled them to compete in the dating game. Similarly, African American cosmetics (especially skin whiteners and hair straighteners) were advertised as 'glorifying our womanhood,' giving dignity of sorts to women stereotyped with racial and rural images." See Cross, An All-Consuming Century, 41.
20. See Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Peiss, "Making Up"; Spigel, Make Room for TV; and others.

22. The history of consumer culture in the US is clearly beyond the scope of a single chapter. The shifts from bourgeois consumption to mass consumption that began in the late 18th century through industrial and political revolutions, the influx of immigrant cultures and the subsequent new consumer communities in the US in the 19th century, the impact of consumer capitalism on class, race, and gender formations in the late 19th century represent just some of crucial transitions and transformations in the relationships between individuals and their consumption habits. See Cross, *An All-Consuming Century*; de Grazia and Furlough, *Sex of Things*.


28. See, for example, Cross, *An All-Consuming Century*.


32. Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*.


34. Peiss, “Making Up.”

35. Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*; Wilson, “Race in Commodity Exchange.”


38. See Cross, An All-Consuming Century; see also Ralph Nader, Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile (New York: Grossman, 1965), for a discussion on these texts and movements.


40. See also the way that resistant discourses of consumption existed in other forms of popular culture, such as popular fictions, from MAD magazine to science fiction, which encouraged skepticism about consumerism and branding.

41. Lazar, “Entitled to Consume.”

42. Ibid., 507.

43. Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London: Verso, 1991).


47. Cross, An All-Consuming Century, 167 (emphasis in original); also see Heath and Potter, Nation of Rebels.


51. Of course, Free to Be...You and Me is a different sort of product than Tampax tampons or Dove soap. People are brought into diverse consumer markets in wide-ranging ways, with products appealing to consumers on multiple levels. The specific practices of production, distribution, and consumption have extensive meanings, and surely when “difference” itself is the product, there is not one generalized manner in which to describe the circuit of commodity exchange.

52. Herman Gray, Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

Entertainment Television (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Sasha Torres,


57. Joseph Turow, Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). The emergence of segmented markets does not, however, necessarily represent a profound economic and social transformation for all communities. As Robert Weems, Grace Elizabeth Hale, and others argue, within African American culture, there is no clear distinction between an earlier mass era of undifferentiated marketing and a later more targeted interpolation of citizen consumers; arguably, there is a way in which African Americans have always been a niche market in American consumer culture. Weems, Desegregating the Dollar; Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940 (New York: Vintage, 1999).


59. See Banet-Weiser, Chris, and Freitas, Cable Visions, 8–9. Cable television was just one result of what Turow calls the "breaking up of America." Turow, Breaking Up America. While certainly the cable industry may have set out to move toward greater diversity, this diversity was a category within the limits already set up by broadcast channels, which appealed to broader audiences. Robert Weems, for example, focuses on the cultivation of the African American market during the 1960s and 1970s through a variety of commercial venues, including mass-market magazines such as Ebony, Hollywood film, an increased interest in white-owned companies in producing African American personal care products, and moves by white-owned insurance companies to cultivate black policyholders. This shift toward focusing on the "difference" of African Americans from whites, rather than sameness, reflected a larger shift in consumer capital toward separate consumer communities rather than mass consumption. As Weems points out, "Ad campaigns in the early 1960s that sought to promote the image of a racially desegregated society were replaced with attempts to exploit blacks' growing sense of racial pride. The development of the 'soul market' exemplified corporate America's attempt to adapt to African American consumers' political and cultural reorientation." See Weems, Desegregating the Dollar, 76. The creation of the "soul market" helped to deliver African Americans to consumer markets in vast numbers, even as it also cultivated white consumption by encouraging white consumers to be "hip" in their taste values. The success in cultivating the African American market led to a new emergence of entertainment and communication.
technologies that catered to this market. For instance, the 1970s witnessed the emergence of the blaxploitation film genre, which catered more exclusively to an African American market (though it also prompted many African Americans to protest the extreme racial and gender stereotyping that characterized that genre). Black-owned mass magazines such as *Ebony* and *Essence* thrived in the consumer context of the 1970s and 1980s, with other communication organizations, such as Black Entertainment Television (BET), emerging in 1980 as part of what seemed to be a growing understanding of black consumer communities. As Beretta Smith-Shumade comments: “While the name ‘Black Entertainment Television’ expressed the network’s intention, the company’s marketing relied on several circulating discourses for support, including the legacy of the black press to expose white injustices upon blacks, the call for black business ownership, the diversity promise of the cable industry, and the view of representation as a sign of equality. Furthermore, Johnson’s [the owner of BET] entrepreneurship and vision developed with knowledge of African Americans’ craving for representation and their assumption of capitalism’s value for black communities.” See Beretta E. Smith-Shumade, “Target Market Black: BET and the Branding of African America,” in *Cable Visions: Television beyond Broadcasting*, ed. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 178.

68. Writing about “power femininity” in ads, Michele Lazar characterizes this “knowledge as power” trope within contemporary marketing as an element of consumer-based empowerment: “Although the educational discourse is premised upon asymmetrical power relations between knowledgeable and authoritative experts and novices in need of guidance, empowerment in educational settings is derived from the acquisition of knowledge and skills that enable one to become self-reliant and experts in one’s own right.” See Lazar, “Entitled to Consume,” 509.


71. Dan Schiller, *How To Think about Information* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010).


73. The idea that some products and their connection to social change are more “authentic” than others is one that continues to have cultural relevance; in a recent article lamenting the purchase of the organic and eco-friendly beauty product line Burt’s Bees, the author tells the story of Burt Shavitz, the company’s founder, as one in which the “authentic” creator, despite the evil takeover of his product by Clorox, continues to live in the “wilderness inside a turkey coop without running water or electricity.” The juxtaposition between the hypercommerciality of Clorox (which, after all, makes products that destroy the environment) and the Thoreau-inspired “free” life of Burt Shavitz demonstrates the continued cultural significance of “authenticity.” See Andrea Whitfill, “Burt’s Bees, Tom’s of Maine, Naked Juice: Your Favorite Brands? Take Another Look—They May Not Be What They Seem,” March 17, 2009, accessed March 18, 2009, http://www.alternet.org/health/31910.


78. Ibid.


80. Ibid., 5.

81. Ibid.

82. Personal interviews with brand marketers, from December 2008 to July 2010.

83. Terranova, “Free Labor.”


85. Arvidsson, *Brands*.

86. As Terranova points out in her discussion of “free” labor on the Internet, “The Internet does not automatically turn every user into an active producer, and every
worker into a creative subject. The process whereby production and consumption are reconfigured within the category of free labor signals the unfolding of a different (rather than completely new) logic of value, whose operations need careful analysis." See Terranova, "Free Labor," 75.

87. Ibid., 36.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

6. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Again, I am not implying that Tequila was offering sex through her cultivation of her MySpace persona (her reality program was ostensibly dedicated to "looking for love").
15. In this sense, there is a distinction between interactive technology and the participatory user. In my argument, I use the term "interactive subject" to invoke both technology design and the participation of the user.
16. The general age range of girls and young women that I explore in this chapter is between twelve and twenty.