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Sneakers and street culture: A postcolonial analysis of marginalized cultural consumption

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It would be valuable to consumer research to increase understanding of marginalized communities and their consumption experiences. This paper advances postcolonial analysis as useful in this respect. A review of postcolonialism shows a perspective that encompasses the experience of the subordinated and marginalized. Hybridity, an alternative version, the self/other divide and power of both the colonizing and colonized positions are key concepts in this lens. Shifting from the dominating view of imperialism, a postcolonial oeuvre offers a nuanced stance that gives voice to the history of the Other and recognition to their stories. Variations within this stream of theory are drawn out and the key aim of this paper is to explicate the value of the postcolonial view to consumer research. To this end two illustrative case studies of postcolonial African experience are offered: one French and one American. Sneaker consumption in African-American street culture traces themes of social alienation, self-identity, criminality and fanatical consumption through the acquisition of sneakers. This experience is contrasted with the experience of postcolonial African communities in France who use other forms of consumption to define their street identity. We conclude that a more nuanced reading of sneaker consumption is available through postcolonialism shedding new light on interpreting symbolic consumption, meaning making and identity expression in traditionally marginalized groups.

Keywords: consumption; diaspora; experience; hybridity; marginalized consumption; postcolonilism

Introduction

Consumer research has revealed much about the motivations, predilections and personal perspectives that drive consumption among individuals. For example, work on nostalgia (Holbrook 1993), desire (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 1996, 2003), anti-consumption (Kozinets 2002), political ideology (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004) and social alienation through fanaticism (Thorne and Bruner 2006) illuminate the flexible ways in which marketing research seeks to apprehend the emotional and social context of the consumer. By way of extension to the existing work in these areas, this research introduces postcolonial theory to shed further light on the cultural, historical and emotional circumstances out of which certain consumption communities emerge.

This research analyzes sneaker consumption among traditionally marginalized groups in the United States and parallels this pattern of consumption with consumption habits among traditionally marginalized groups in southern France. Themes of social alienation, criminality and fanatical consumption are expressed through the acquisition of sneakers. However, the comparison of African-American groups in the United States with North/West African groups in France illuminates the significance of localized experience, specificity of value attachment and

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individuated social apprehension. We argue that these themes are created out of a specific set of historical, cultural and experiential circumstances of race which may be better addressed through a postcolonial analysis. A postcolonial lens would enable us to interpret the value attached to sneaker consumption from the perspective of these users. We argue that a heightened consciousness of racial marginalization underscores these consumption groups, thus metaphorically actualizing a subcultural desire to reclaim and assume a denuded power space. Through a discussion of this consumption experience, we may further understand the role of historical racial experience and its impact upon contemporary acts of discursive reclamation. The significance of this research lies in the way it argues for the application of postcolonialism, bringing an under-explored theoretical perspective to marketing and proposing a different theoretical perception of the consumption sensibilities of socially/historically marginalized groups. Prior to the presentation of the study, we present an overview of the postcolonial perspective. This discussion is resumed after the presentation of the research and a case is made to enjoin the postcolonial oeuvre.

Postcolonialism: a review

As an ideological endeavor, postcolonialism excavates and illuminates indigenous experiences of colonialism to paint a more complete picture of its enduring effects. Therefore, its principal objective is understanding colonialism from the nuanced perspective that encompasses the experience of subordinated and voiceless groups. Its second objective is to accentuate the indigenous experience (of the "colonized") and present it as a counter or parallel narrative to the white, Western voice (of the "colonizer") which has typically dominated the colonial narrative through discussions surrounding myth, fantasy, desire and ambivalence in the colonial encounter. These Western experiences of colonialism have been well-documented but the expression or narration of indigenous experiences had been ignored in mainstream scholarly consciousness until the evolution of a postcolonial framework. Thus, the core concepts of hybridity (mix of experiences and perspectives) and alternative version (acknowledgement of the indigenous voice), emphasized by influential postcolonialists such as Bhabha (1990) and Spivak (1988), lend the structure for the current direction of postcolonial debate. In the postcolonial discourse, the interwoven narratives of the colonized rival those of the colonizer whose story has been explicated.

Thirdly, the postcolonial framework interprets the traditional division of East and West into categories of Colonizer/Colonized, Us/Them, Self/Other to typify a paranoiac desire for supremacy on behalf of the Occidental. These binary oppositions, constructed by the Occidental, have been explored in detail by Bhabha (1990), Spivak (1998) and Said (1978) and form the lens through which the colonial encounter between colonizer and colonized is synthesized. This vexed relationship has been theorized through various perspectives, such as feminist (Gafaiti 1996; Yegenoglu 1998; Dobie 2001), psychoanalytical (Fuss 1994; Pellegrini 1997) and political (Fanon 1961; Rouvez 1994; Moore-Gilbert 1997) to name a few, and is understood to involve a complicated dance of subjectivity and interpellation. For example, Conklin (1997) and Spurr (1993) discuss the cultural factors involved in French colonialism and the nineteenth-century development of a world view that promoted the notion of Western supremacy and the need for redeeming the East. Conklin's work analyzes the French "civilizing mission"; the idea that the superior culture of France would provide guidance and salvation to indigenous cultures in the East. This comprehensive political, social, religious and economic policy promised to modernize "primitive" cultures and enhance French interests in the process. Spurr's work demonstrates how this ideology manifested. He shows how French media and scholars re-articulated or affirmed their superior world view and compartmentalized the East into a contained, penetrable site. Both of these influential works illustrate how deeply the lines between Us/Them were

drawn in classical colonial discourse. The postcolonial agenda shows that the *mélange* of voices that constitute narrative are not requisitely bound, nor identified, by their status as either known (colonizer) or foreign (colonized). That is to say, postcolonial analyses acknowledge the pre-existing power division between colonizing and colonized positions in traditional narrations of colonialism but postcolonialism also seeks to subvert these traditional constructions.

Just as the consumer experience has been synthesized in a variety of ways, postcolonialism has been structured through many different lenses (Bahktin 1986; Chiki 1996; Dallmayr 1996; King 1999; Moore-Gilbert 1997). Classic anti-colonial works by Fanon and Memmi, written in the last moments of French rule in North Africa, form the foundations for divergent postcolonial discourses (Pellegrini 1997). Fanon and Memmi were among the first to articulate the colonized's plight and provide insight into the post effects of the colonial context. Their works constitute important foundations for the postcolonial project. Fanon's call for indigenous political restoration in *Les damnés de la terre* (1961) advocates a nostalgic desire to use pre-colonial culture as the blueprint for the future. Likewise, Memmi (1957) identifies the ahistoricity of the colonizer's position under colonial rule. Memmi offers a more expansive discussion of the de-personalized state of the colonized individual, arguing that de-personalization constitutes a fundamental characteristic of colonialism:

> the colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity. (*Le colonisé n'est jamais caractérisé d'une manière différentielle; il n'a droit qu'à noyade dans le collectif anonyme.*) (Memmi 1957, 123)

This process of de-personalization enables the Western subject to view the Eastern culture as a whole; something vast but generic, with no hidden anomalies. It allows the East to be "managed" or dominated and while "the Orientals lived in their world and *we* lived in ours" (Said 1993, 44), the relationship afforded by this "lumping together" of native people is inevitably one of power imbalance. The key elements in this scheme – de-individualization and censorship – allow the occidental to narrate colonization and its so-called "benefits." The Other becomes simply that: a nameless mass with no discourse of its own but rather an imposed discourse derived from the view of the colonizer. The postcolonial discourse has addressed this discursive imbalance through the positing of the Western subject as equally fictive or a *personae dramatis* drawn into the colonial moment along with the colonized. Occidental literature frequently revealed a sense of instability and self-confrontation in the colonies (Loti 1881, 1889; Segalen 1995) where the power base ascribed to the colonizer was inherently uncertain. Postcolonialism further explores this dynamic and renders the West as bound by myth, fiction and stereotype as the East.

Sartre (2001), a friend and admirer of Memmi and Fanon, echoes their calls for historical and cultural restoration, thus lending visibility to an emergent discourse which has become a prevalent theoretical lens in contemporary scholarship. In the modern arena, diverse sites of inquiry have included topics as Indian nationalism under the Raj (Hubel 1996), Peruvian nuns as anchors for their society during colonial rule (Burns 1999), and studies of narrative difference (Mills 1991). These works demonstrate how the previously maligned or forgotten indigenous elements of the colonial narrative have been placed at the forefront of scholarly debate in the postcolonial era, exposing experiences that had previously been untold.

The attention shown to the colonized's voice has had particular importance in the scholarly debate surrounding self-representation among marginalized groups and its role in generating a more heterogeneous picture of the colonial and postcolonial experiences. Lowe (1991) demonstrates how the colonial experience is not characterized by linearity and homogeneity, but rather comprised of diversity and intersection. An acknowledgment of the many stories that colonialism

provokes forms the basis for Lowe's work and the foundation for the contemporary academic discourse on colonialism and postcolonialism. Thus, postcolonial critique has begun to apprehend the complex dynamics surrounding the colonial encounter and its lingering social effects. Intersecting narratives of localized experience (Apter 1999), women's experiences (Woodhull 1993; Lewis 1996; Yegenoglu 1998) and sexuality (McClintock 1995; Julliard 1996; Sharpley-Whiting 1999; Treat 1999; Dobie 2001) have all come to bear on the cross-roads created by the postcolonial space.

Therefore, issues of perspective, voice and personal appropriation of one's own memory (and the right to possess that memory) have emerged as key elements in the postcolonial discourse. Hogan (2000) and Subramaniam (2001) address this critical issue of discursive authority. While Hogan focuses upon the ways in which the linear narratives of British writers such as Orwell and Kipling are de-stabilized by the colonial experience, Subramaniam emphasizes text as a principal mode of communication (linking postcolonialism to other practices such as semiotics and structuralism). The relevance of narrative as a key form of self-expression, and a complex site of interwoven stories and voices, has made it an important source in postcolonial scholarship. The text, in its postmodern form, emerges as the vehicle to carry us from the colonial to the postcolonial era since text itself becomes a de-limited space free from the stifling meta-narratives of the modern (i.e. colonial) epoch. Subramaniam emphasizes the complexity and intersection of literary narrative and its capacity to transport through time by capturing the changing nuances and voices of history.

Western literary narratives of exile and exotic imagination (Loti 1881, 1884, 1889; Forster 1926; Lawrence 1935; Conrad 1973; Segalen 1995) are balanced by the voices of native writers who emerge in the postcolonial era. The wing of postcolonialism, known as subaltern studies, informs the theoretical backdrop to the emergence and interpretation of indigenous or colonized writings. This theoretical lens is useful since it identifies indigenous literature as a genre unto itself, rather than conflating it with general colonial writing. This emphasis on a specific experience (and thus specific genre of writing) means that these works, when read within subaltern theory, can be evaluated and contextualized according to a nuanced framework that apprehends the particular context out of which these texts emerge. Rivero highlights the relevance of literature to the postcolonial project since it "signaled the answers by cultural subgroups to questions such as, What are we as a group, or even as a 'class'? How do we see ourselves? How do we define who we are?" (Pellegrini, 1997, 162). Among the postcolonial texts, for instance, Rushdie (1983, 1995, 1999, 2005), an acknowledged postcolonial critic (Needham 2000; Sanga 2001; Bahri 2003; Schultheis 2004), illustrates the burden of memory and the inability to avoid the fragmented self-images created by the past. His novels engage the postcolonial challenge to re-assert a sense of native cultural history, played out against the rupture and tension of the colonial past (Needham 2000). Rushdie poses the postcolonial question: How do we now imagine ourselves and how do we restore an identity which is lost in the fragments of colonialism?

Rushdie's preoccupation with India's splintered past emerges through this question and his writing represents a powerful effort to question and re-discover lost identity. Naipaul (2001) equally captures this evanescent relationship between past and future in *Half a Life*. He writes of the native's displacement from his broken culture and his efforts to heal by throwing himself into the society of the West. Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* (1947) also focuses the reconstruction of a collective Indian identity based on memories of the pre-colonial era. As a feminist Algerian writer, Beyala (1988, 1992) brings a particular dimension as she imagines the Algerian experience from a feminist perspective. Her recollections offer an original perspective on how nostalgia may capture or evoke contemporary experiences. As the above samples illustrate, the postcolonial literary canon stems from a diverse range of writers who interrogate

their particular part of the postcolonial experience. Yet all are characterized by a fundamental pre-occupation with the remembered past and its meaning in the present.

Postcolonialism forms an important background to this research. Its theoretical elements provide the critical, interpretive and historiographical structure for this investigation into marginalized consumption. Postcolonial consumption evokes an exchange between memory, idealization of self and of history itself expressed through the meaning or value attached to cultural practices. In this paper, the cultural experience of marginalization and attempting to recuperate self-identity (and power) is explored using sneaker consumption as a focus to expose the inherent value of the postcolonial perspective. The construction of the African American is especially vivid when a postcolonial lens is drawn over an American made documentary of contemporary consumption and contrasted with the French African experience derived from interviews. Adopting an intertextual perspective of these expressions of culture offers a means to explicate the virtues of the postcolonial theoretical stance. After presenting each case and noting the postcolonial inferences that can be drawn, we will return to suggest the value of post-colonialism for analyses of consumer culture.

Method

The method involved a two-phase data collection/analysis. The first phase involved content analysis of varied source material gathered from website, archive, advertising and media sources based in the United States. We adopted an intertextual framework to read across the data for emergent themes. The discursive practice of intertextuality has enjoyed a long-established heritage in the Humanities and it has been applied in history, literature, media and cultural studies (McKee 2003). Intertextuality has been useful in many other arenas and has now been adopted in certain strains of management theory (Boje 1996, 2001; Czarniawska 1997, 1998). This method was found to be fruitful in establishing consistent themes. In marketing O'Donohoe (2002) made a strong case for the use of literary theory and concepts, including her use of intertextuality in advertisements (O'Donohoe 1997). The analysis presented here relies on a broad view of cultural texts wherein meanings cross boundaries between and through all types of cultural production, such as film, printed press, electronic communication, the arts, and the products that consumers purchase, in a socially shared space of meaning exchange. Ritson and Elliott (1999) and O'Donohoe (1997) have made good use of this excursion of meaning away from its point of origin to explore young adult use of advertisements to form social bonds. The intention here however, is to explore the theoretical potential of the postcolonial oeuvre. In pursuit of this aim, the cases offered here are illuminative and not intended to be representative, iconic or typical. It is the possibilities for analytical interpretation derived from a specific theoretical stance that is our concern.

The documentary *Just for Kicks* (*JFK*) examined sneakers as an industry and as a consumption phenomenon. The main thrust of the documentary focused on the notion of "where did you get those?" that is, the obsession with having original, previously unseen sneakers. The discourse of self-construction through marginalization was not the core intent of the documentary and the reading presented here was not intended by either the film makers or the interviewees. Rather this documentary presents a quite specific but culturally dominant construction of the African/American. A reading of anterior source material added to the perspective of the documentary.

Although quite a specific cultural text, the focus in *JFK* on sneaker consumption as emblematic of marginalized African Americans was a useful metaphoric lens through which to examine the materialistic ambitions around self-identity for this group in postcolonial times. The concepts of race, class and ethnicity were elided here to construct a marginalizing and colonized view of African Americans. A comparative analysis with Africans from colonized ethnicities but

residing in another colonial homeland exposed much of the veracity of the postcolonial oeuvre. Continuing with the specificities of sneaker consumption maintains a consumptive focus that is illustrative of a wider social experience but has potential to highlight the extent to which the colonizing view continues to construct the Other.

The second data collection/analysis phase was based in France (Montpellier, Toulon and Nice) and is compared with the *JFK* documentary. Twenty individuals in the age range of 18–35 with a 50%:50% gender division were interviewed in the south of France. Despite the fact that this age group did not have the direct experience of moving from the colonies, or participating in the colonial wars of last century, this age group was selected because they represented a demographic of the post-colonial street culture, like the interviewees presented in the documentary. The participants' families came from *ancien* French colonies, such as Algeria, Tunisia and Senegal and all reside full-time in France. Their experience was generally that of being raised in France in an ethnically specific context. They were bi-lingual, speaking French and the language of their country of heritage. The informants considered themselves part of the "street" community in their city and enjoyed involved contact with their ethnic community. Informants came from a variety of work backgrounds including clothing or shoe industry retailer salespeople, university students, public service and some were unemployed. The interviews were performed informally at cafes, parks or shops, lasting up to one and a half hours with notes taken. The objective in interviewing French informants and pursuing similar questions in France to those in the American documentary was to offer an indicative comparison across racial, religious and geographical parameters and illustrate some specificities of the postcolonial experience.

The following section focuses on the African-American experience across several aspects of sneaker consumption drawing on the hip hop and rap culture. In particular, the utilization of black street culture in the promotion of sneakers draws corporations into a relationship with a marginalized black culture which paradoxically draws celebrity style attention to that black culture. Later we will argue that this paradox can be better understood through the postcolonial lens. The appropriation of cultural symbols for the particular interpretation and purposes of black street culture suggests that postcolonial analysis could reveal additional understandings.

Sneakers in the USA: a case study enhanced by postcolonial interpretation

This case study traces themes of social alienation, self-identity, desirable criminality and fanatical consumption through the retail acquisition of sneakers among marginalized American groups as constructed in the *JFK* documentary. *JFK* is a media representation of a street culture that focuses on, and attaches social value to, sneakers. The representation put forth by the documentary is read intertextually here across other sources such as websites and print media. Sneakers will be shown to be emblematic of identity construction and, through their close links to black street culture, to have paradoxical interactions with corporate America. Barsana (2005) describes the climate of sneaker consumption in the United States where "sneakers have been an integral part of the urban and hip-hop culture since Michael Jordan's dunk from the free throw line and Run DMC's hit, 'My Adidas'" (Barsana 2005, 1).

The *JFK* documentary records informal interviews with members from African-American and Hispanic communities living in the urban environment of New York City as well as commentary from high-profile rappers and famous sports stars. In this paper, we focus specifically on the experience of African-American symbolic use of sneakers. While the documentary suggests that sneaker consumption among Hispanic groups shares similarities with African Americans and the same symbolism is attributed to sneakers since street culture includes Hispanic groups, we suggest that the history of Hispanic communities in the Unites States is substantially different from African-American experiences and should be explored more fruitfully through a different

lens. Therefore, in this paper, we restrict our analysis to the commentary by African-American participants.

The documentary claims to offer an "original analysis of the incestuous relationship that sneaker brands maintain with Hip-Hop and urban culture" (Hip Hop Press 2006). These communities ascribe particular significance to sneakers (particularly among street and rap communities) where a sense of collective identity, the self-conscious expression of masculinity or femininity (which tends to spill through to sexuality) and street dominance emanate from the experience of purchasing and collecting sneakers that have "street cred" or particular status.

Further intertextual reading is offered in a recent exhibition of sneakers at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Australia, the resonance of sneaker consumption was acknowledged as a significant social phenomenon where

> Sneakers are one of the most exciting and fast-changing phenomena in youth fashion today ... *The Complete Collector's Guide* declares "The sneaker has moved out from the sports arena and exploded into popular culture, a fashion staple that transcends race and class yet defines who you are in today's urban tribes" ... Finally, the involvement of artists and designers in customizing sneakers has extended the creative possibilities of the form ... (NGV 2006)

This editorial from the NGV highlights the perceived cultural relevance of sneakers and their organic links to subcultural activity and the potential for this documentary as an intertextual resource to explicate the value of postcolonial theory.

The criminal image: the Black man as criminal

The connection between sneakers and the rapper culture implicates sneakers in a socio-historical discourse that situates the African-American man as a criminal. His crimes take place on the street where, stereotypically he is perceived as a dangerous gang member, a hooligan that threatens middle-class sensibilities, in particular, the white middle class. To this extent, he is posited as the Other; the antithesis (both in color and lifestyle) from the dominant normative experience of being a white American. Or, as Fanon phrases it, "not only must the black man be black: he must be black in relation to the white man" (1967, 110). Indeed, the idea of the American-American street-dwelling man potentially jeopardizes the social structure itself. He performs acts of aggressive rebellion wearing sneakers that will accompany him to jail.

This conceptualization of the black man as a threat to "American decency" originates from two sources: the colonial experience and the slave experience – one of course flowed from the other. The image of the African American as hypermasculine, strong and a predator upon white decency underscored the image of the black male subject in the white, colonial mind. This image typically found its most dominant expression in the fear of rape of a white woman where, as Fuss notes, "fabricated charges of rape were used as powerful colonial instruments of fear and intimidation" (1994, 31). Fuss' insight applies in equal measure to colonizer and colonized alike since the colonizers appeared perpetually fearful of losing their control over their subjects and the colonized were fearful of being falsely accused. The greatest fear confronting American landowners was the possibility of their women being violated by a strong, black man. This fear of violence against white women prompted discussion regarding miscegenation and the horror of the half-caste such as Jefferson's resistance to slave freedom on the grounds that they would "stain the blood" (Jefferson 1944, 256) of their former master – that is, that they would return to rape white women. Rogin describes Jefferson's vexed approach as emblematic of the general white reaction to the black man which "issued forth in a quadruple fantasy: that interracial sex was a barrier to emancipation, that it stained blood, that it was driven by black and not white practices, and that colonization in Africa could solve the problem" (1996, 11). This discourse

surrounding miscegenation, tainted blood and the danger posed to white morality allegorized a fundamental anxiety regarding the potential strength of the colonized subject and the need for strict control over the colonized's culture, social practices, virtues and soul. The greater control assumed by the colonizer, the safer the situation would be.

This historical motif of the black male slave as violent threat labors into the contemporary world (Bryant 2003; Young 2007) and has been recognized as a key element of racism in sport, and the construction of the black athlete as invincible and physically vital (Hoberman 2007). Indeed, it is possible to discuss a whole series of complicated social and cultural circumstances that surround the African-American experience of modern America which have been cultivated out of the early slave experience (Jones 2005). At a general level, African-American society has assumed subordinate status and has experienced the socio-economic and cultural disadvantage that accompanies such subordination. African-American rappers have attempted to explode the conceptualization through music, telling their stories of victimization, incarceration and punishment at the hands of white fear. The appeal of rap as a genre and the consequent ascent of rap stars have enabled African-American communities to access the mainstream music market and, like their French brothers, narrate their particular experiences.

The rap genre has narrated the experience of African-American criminality and the experience both of being seen as Public Enemy No. 1 (as the rap group NWA described it) and of being in jail. Sneakers have played a role in the way rappers have attempted to reclaim criminal imagery and assume control over their narrative. For instance, in the *JFK* documentary, 1980s rap group Run DMC is shown promoting their albums by wearing sneakers with no laces. Their no laces image emulated

> prison fashion. But in prison it's not a fashion. They issue you no shoe laces so that you can't do something desperate with them ... But, out on the street, guys go to prison, now that they're back home and they decide they like the way it looks and they like the way it feels so guess what even though they're now free, they're not gonna put shoe laces back on their sneakers. And then you get kids, you know, like Jaster Master Jay [a member of Run DMC who was slain in a recording studio in 2002] who say "hmm, that looks really cool" and he starts wearing his shoes the same way and you have a fad. (Adler in *JFK* 2005)

In this conscious effort to wear sneakers with no laces we see enacted a connection with the historical experiences of being a black man which, from a historical and subcultural perspective, involves being in prison.

This coalescence between prison life and Run DMC's no-laces look came under scrutiny by other quarters of the African-American community. Dr. Deas, a medical doctor from the same part of Hollis Queens as Run DMC, released his own rap single "Felon Sneakers" denouncing laceless sneakers. His lyrics, which narrated the possible backlash of associating rap, sneakers and criminality and cost black credibility in the eyes of white America, were included in the documentary:

> Your felon sneakers can't fit the bill; you got to know yourself to be really chill.
>
> And you rob, you rape, you shoot and kill, you're wearin' those sneakers but you lost your will.
>
> Now to all my young black brothers, if you really want to win the race.
>
> Tighten up your laces, so you can keep up with the pace. (Deas Felon Sneakers in *JFK* 2005)

Speaking to the young African-American male – the main wearer of laceless sneakers – Dr. Deas' lyrics narrate the stereotypical history of the black man, associating him with acts of violence

and aggression. The lyrics re-iterate white history's image of African-American masculinity, attempting to situate him yet again in a discourse of desired redemption from, subordination to and respect granted by white America. Adler discusses the meaning of Dr. Deas' message to young African-American men which seeks to re-articulate the white, colonial perspective

> whether you knew it, or not, young black man, if you want to grow up, enter mainstream society, be productive and become a solid citizen, you better give it up because the people who have money in this world, the people who can potentially give you a job in this world, they're going to reject you in your felon sneakers. (Adler in *JFK* 2005)

Adler's comments on Dr. Deas illuminates the way in which Dr. Deas' rap locates the African-American man within white power structure, assuming that he aspires to the same value system such as a job, "solid" status and acceptability and takes for granted the white black man's exclusion from white hegemony. Dr. Deas' lyrics implicitly suggest that the white power structure is the positive one and that the black man is the one who must acquiesce. He is a criminal; a hood who does not dress appropriately. He actively flaunts civil (white) society and will not integrate. Sneakers are the symbol of this social disrespect, a fashion accessory that signals the nexus between civic and criminal, acceptable and rejected, black and white.

However, in the documentary Run DMC rejected Dr. Deas' critique of their laceless sneaker image, retaliating against his efforts to pigeonhole them and their audience. His opposition to Dr. Deas revealed a postcolonial sensibility which has emerged through many forms of cultural production. DMC comments "Don't' stereotype the B-Boy! Just because I'm rocking with my Adidas with no laces, my hat to the side, doesn't make me a negative individual" (DMC in *JFK* 2005). In this exchange we see the capacity for inversion, arrest and sublimation of traditional narrative gives the rap culture social and political resonance and plays out a distinctly postcolonial perspective. Sneaker consumers continue to speak of sneaker theft on the streets, or how sneakers without appropriate laces (which are now fashionable again after Run DMC's popularity waned) are like "a gun without bullets" (Shabazz in *JFK* 2005) and continue to weave the theme of crime into the sneaker consumption discourse. However, they do so with a sense of agency and confidence in their ability to narrate their urban existence. The colonial conflation of the black man and crime is appropriated by this section of the African-American community itself where crime and the hazards of street life become part of their own narrative. Run DMC's re-appropriation of the "black man as criminal" motif to instead represent urban freedom and dissent from the *status quo* which we argue needs to be understood within its social and historical context. In adopting laceless sneakers, Run DMC implicitly adopted a key aspect of the white colonial narrative and claimed it for their own – an act that becomes most recognizable in all its nuances through a postcolonial perspective.

This reclamation of the criminal image has allowed the African-American community to speak about their experiences during incarceration via rap and to symbolize their particular life experience through sneakers. This may account for why, in January 2007, Adidas released the "Black Power" sneaker to celebrate Black History month (Sneaker Files website), situating sneakers at the center of African-American historical experience. The reclamation of history and externally constructed motifs represents a distinctive strain of postcolonial philosophy which seeks to re-connect the colonized subject with their heritage. This narration of empowerment has accounted for the success of Reebok's use of 50 Cent (a rapper whose mother was murdered, who has been shot eight times and has spent time in jail) and rapper Shaun Carter who enjoys street credibility. Their own lines of sneakers improved RBK's sales by 350% and rivaled the success of Nike's use of Michael Jordan for the Air Jordan range. The marriage of rap, hip hop, street hustlers and sneakers appeals to its community because it represents a particular existence,

a reality that its participants know well; to wear particular sneakers is to wear a particular (racialized) history, culture and process of self-identification.

White America = capitalist America? The ascent of the streets through sneaker consumption

The acquisition of sneakers has allowed some sections of African-American communities, which identify with and represent street culture, to express their street savvy difference from white, middle-class America. As we have seen, the "black man as criminal" image has been simultaneously pastiched, subverted, challenged, embraced and claimed by African-American groups. Sneakers have been integral to this ideological revolt since they have been visually and socially loaded with the anti-establishment figuration that underscores urban minority discourse. Such symbolic consumption is a key tool in the construction of this identity and a postcolonial analysis uncovers the counter culture's narrative. Sneaker consumption has also offered a route into the corridors of white power which, in turn, has enabled marginalized groups to re-visit issues of social alienation, existing power imbalances and the complicated question of how to forge self-identity. This narrative, which appears implicitly in the documentary, is uncovered through a postcolonial reading.

Run DMC popularization of the relationship between hip hop urban culture and sneakers is shown in the *JFK* documentary. They signed a million dollar deal with Adidas which promoted the sneaker brand and created its return to dominance in the marketplace. Master DMC relates "we cared about Adidas" and while the group wore Adidas, sang about Adidas and re-created the brand in the image of the street, their relationship with Adidas paved the way for an organic relationship between sneaker labels and the street. Various rap groups affiliated with certain brands throughout the eighties. Fresh Gordon sponsored Fila, Heavy D promoted Nike, Busy Bee backed Converse, The Beastie Boys were only to be seen in their suede Adidas and LL Cool J got behind Troop. The relationship between a rap artist and a sneaker brand became its central avenue to credibility and popularity.

The phenomenal success of Michael Jordan as Nike's new face is a striking example of how African-American street culture has built the symbolic meaning of sneakers within the street culture. His relationship with Nike saw the brand soar to meteoric success after a waning brand image. The Air Jordans made a political statement when they first hit the basketball court on the feet of a black man. The NBA (National Basketball Association) clearly stated in their rules that sneakers were to have some "semblance of white on the shoe" (Scoop Jackson in *JFK* 2005). The first pair of Air Jordans was black with a dash of red. Each time Jordan wore the sneakers on court he drew a significant fine of several thousand dollars but continued to wear the sneakers. This contest was augmented by Jordan's performance on the court where he dominated key white players such as Aines and Byrnes from the Boston Celtics, a predominantly white team. Jordan's supremacy over the white players was interpreted by black spectators as an act of subjugation over the traditional white image of the NBA since "black folks wasn't likin' Boston, no way!" (Jackson in *JFK* 2005).

In spite of the close association of hip hop, the NBA and the African-American sports hero (Hoberman 2007), the clash between the NBA and an African-American man over sneakers signified an important moment in the evolution of black credibility and the ability to defy the homogeneous narrative of white power structure. The NBA prescribed a "white" motif to be worn; Jordan defied this law and wore black sneakers. From a postcolonial perspective, this confrontation can be read as a symbolic struggle between representations, through color, of white power and black subversion. Jordan's defiance of the "white" NBA law metaphorically signaled the ascent of the black man, the dissolution of white control and the power possibilities

for the individual. Although this postcolonial interpretation was not suggested in the documentary, this racially signified confrontation underscored the outward struggle about the sneaker.

The street success of the Nike Air Force 1 "white on white" sneaker, dubbed the "Uptown" because its original adopters came from Harlem, can be interpreted as a further appropriation of white symbolism by black culture. The success of this best selling sneaker ever can be directly credited to its authentic status in American street culture. Rapper Caz comments in the documentary

> If you in New York City, or pretty much anywhere in this country right about now, ain't got a pair of these, alright, you're not walkin' the right way, ok, your outfit is lackin' just a little ... (Caz in *JFK* 2005)

The confidence to adopt and cultivate a cult around an all-white sneaker can be understood in two ways, both of which stem from the racial complication that surrounds the evolution of the urban milieu. Firstly, it can be interpreted as a desire by black culture to display white symbols in an effort to gain credibility or acceptance within the mainstream, white culture. Alternatively, from a postcolonial standpoint, the adoption of the "white on white" Uptown (or "Ups" as they are known) by black culture can be seen as a political gesture to self-appropriate white symbolism and imbue it with an alternative cultural narrative, thereby relegating white culture to the status of Other. Again, the documentary and the interviewees appeared unaware of the postcolonial lens through which their comments can be read.

Street "cat" Bonz Malone praises Phil Knight, head of Nike, for the Air Force 1 sneaker and for acknowledging that

> we [the minority urban culture] are the staple to your shit. There aren't that many joggers in the world ... Air Force 1 is a planet unto itself and we run that planet, you understand ... We make that shit evolve and rotate. (Malone in *JFK* 2005)

Bonz's remarks, when re-interpreted from a postcolonial view, narrate a story of reclaimed power, a geographical and cultural take-over that locates the racially and socially marginalized ranks of the urban culture at the center of a "planet" where the minority becomes the normative power. Bonz, then, narrates the shift in power from white corporate America to the world of the streets and implicitly narrates a transition or an "evolution" from invisibility to self-creation. Emergent to his narration of transitional power is the creation of a tangible identity that has been cultivated outside of the white imagination; instead it comes from the streets, from within marginalized culture, where the terms of reference are distinctly different. The realization that the urban hip hop world drives sneaker consumption also exposes recognition of the urban world as substantial, real and powerful. It has form, an identity and the dynamism to effect change.

The story told in the documentary makes it clear the relationship between urban culture and sneakers has also provided an avenue for traditionally marginalized groups to enter corporate America. While major manufacturers such as Nike and Reebok did not like to ingratiate themselves with street culture, they needed it as a consumer base and as a hook for credibility within other markets:

> it's a kind of a dance that these corporations have to do. They want the appeal, they want to be cutting-edge. But they don't want to get cut. (Adler in *JFK* 2005)

Urban hip hop culture dictated what was cool and these meanings were made available throughout the world. As self-made sneaker manufacturer, rapper and businessman Damon Dash points out:

> whatever we [urban culture] wear, the sneakers must conform to a make, and that, in turn, turns into sales. It also gives us a certain level of credibility and respect on a corporate level because, um, these people that are making the sneakers are understanding how important it is and where the consumer, what the consumer follows and that just happens to be us. We're the trendsetters. (Dash in *JFK* 2005)

Urban culture participants, then, are not only enthusiastic consumers of sneakers but also the creators of "cool" on a broader level. The power of the streets is to influence a twenty-six billion dollar industry. The self-referential "we," which appears in many of the documentary interviews, implicitly narrates a collective experience of social malignment and sense of conquest over the racial *status quo*. We posit that from a postcolonial perspective, they narrate their collective ascent to power through the symbolic and literal world of sneakers, finally finding an avenue to overturn stereotypes, find self-identity through the street experience and generate credibility. Dash enlarges on this influence in the documentary:

> I been around the world and I see number one Harlem influences America and the world is influenced *by* America. So that means really the rest of the world is influenced by America being influenced by Harlem which means Harlem is the biggest influence on the planet and that's just how I see things. (Dash in *JFK* 2005)

This articulation of self-referentiality and the location of Harlem culture at the center of contemporary society signal an important fissure in the organizing effects of white American power narratives. Dash inadvertently engages this postcolonial position to establish a counter-narrative that valorizes the colonized's experience. Through a postcolonial lens his narrative threatens the voice of white history since it ascribes culture-making practices to Harlem, re-situating cultural and historical narrative within African-American references and language. It also threatens financial, social and ethical structures since the contemporary world is accordingly re-organized in line with a street savvy doctrine that rewards different behaviors, ethics and values from those of white America. Dash's commentary symbolizes a provocative reclamation of narrative, cultural and financial power that confronts the assumption that white America holds the authority over culture-making practices.

Dash critiques white America, which is, again, significant in that it unwittingly constructs a postcolonial counter-critique of the dominant hegemony. The process of reclamation gives way to counter-critique and subversion:

> it's funny to me how stupid, you know, corporate America's been in how much they just really haven't wanted to accept the fact that the urban culture is at the forefront of their economy. Now that we know about it, now that we're hip to game, we have the wherewithal to do things ourselves, it's either get down or lay down. (Dash in *JFK* 2005)

Dash's remarks illuminate the way in which marginalized cultures have appropriated the corporate world through the agency of their self-created hip hop culture. The hip hop milieu stems from their experience of the streets and is imbued with a particular set of values that have emerged from this quite specifically non-white, marginalized experience. In our postcolonial analysis, hip hop culture leads into the ability to appropriate white American capitalism which has been enacted through sneaker manufacture and marketing (Oliver 2006). Dash, like many others, now sees the sneaker market as his own, making white America answerable to their values and visions. Thus, sneaker consumption has enabled black street culture to forge a conscious sense of identity which has also opened the gateway to its own power base which now questions the ascendancy of white control. Read from a postcolonial perspective, the blueprint for the reclamation of identity for the black street culture has not resided in a nostalgic view of

the past. Rather it relies upon an engagement with the cultural dynamics of the present. Black street culture has crafted a plausible counter-narrative to white America.

Urban culture as happy consumers: signs of social status

This engagement with the culture of modern America has flowed through to the general urban culture where its members relish their status as consumers, a point that is made by the documentary:

> Hip hoppers are not alienated from the capitalist system. They are happy capitalists ok. In fact, the idea is they want to own something ok. (Adler in *JFK* 2005)

This has led to the acquisition of sneakers as a form of subcultural capital (Thornton 1996; Jensen 2006) giving way to activities such as hunting for sneakers that have not yet hit the market or, as Jay Z, DJ Clark Kent and Damon Dash made famous, wearing sneakers only once. This elitist meta-narrative underscores the meaning of sneakers where

> looking good, feeling good, you know. Showing dat, I call it like, you know, the ghetto celebrity or the ghetto superstar side of yourself, you know, it's a drug man, that's heavy. (Stoute in *JFK* 2005)

Bonz Malone describes the experience of searching for rare or discontinued sneakers. His research consumes much of his time and stories of this kind can be found in other sources such as *Sneaker Freaker* and on chat sites (Sneaker Freaker; Sneaker Nation) Bonz speaks of his obsessive need to pursue that elusive rare sneaker:

> I will not rest. I mean I'll sleep and I'll eat and I'll keep lookin' around but it ain't, it is never out of my mind and I'm gonna find the sneakers ... I'll spend thousands on a airline ticket just to do that. Now, of course, you're gonna be like "this nigga's insane, you know, you don't gotta do all of that". I know you don't gotta do all of that. But look at what you're missin'. (Malone in *JFK* 2005)

Bonz narrates his self-identity as an African-American man whose search for sneakers metaphorically captures his connection with his world. His social network aids him in acquiring the sneakers that will enhance his status, further entrenching him in the urban milieu. His self-reference as "nigga" suggests an awareness of his minority status, but also demonstrates an appropriation of the language that has traditionally oppressed his community. Sneakers and race combine to generate a counter-narrative of resistance to normative American behavior. It is permissible in the street milieu to leave work, avoid "traditional" responsibilities and devote time to sneaker consumption. The dominant white value structure has no influence or meaning in this context. Bonz narrates a dissent from traditional values, replacing these values with an alternate passion. His consumption practices represent a narrative of resistance, a flaunting of traditional responsibilities which is made possible through an engagement with street culture. His consumption of sneakers symbolizes the construction of a new ethics system, a new way to engage with one's environment and a fresh sense of self. We will now turn to the French experience to reinforce the case for furthering postcolonial analyses in consumption research.

Sneaker consumption as local experience: French street culture is French

Sneaker consumption in the United States among African-American groups as represented in the *JFK* documentary embodied quite different meanings from the consumption of sneakers among traditionally marginalized groups in France. Like the United States, street culture is often

expressed through rap. Rap plays a central role in the culture's values and perspective. However, the symbolism of sneakers did not transfer across the Atlantic. French informants attached racialized identity value to other signs such as jeans, their mode of speech and other outward shows of a consolidated marginal culture which would clearly open the way to a postcolonial interpretation of their consumption practices. One informant, Jeanne, remarked:

> I feel my history in other ways and maybe I express my history but not through sneakers. I come from an Algerian history and I am proud of that. I have to be. France is never going to embrace me but I don't think that my clothes tell that story.[1]

Informants could narrate their experience of feeling marginalized in France but did not see a symbolic link between their story of isolation and sneakers. The French street context, in which traditionally marginalized groups participate, is equally open to a postcolonial analysis. The significant point to be made from the French street culture case is that their culture and symbols are different from their American counterparts. A postcolonial analysis increases the ability of researchers to interpret their culture and capture its nuances.

De-symbolized sneakers and the difference in cultural signification in France

Some French informants considered themselves obsessive about their sneaker ownership. They made clear distinctions about which sneakers were popular or "cool" and those that were not popular. One informant, Jean, commented:

> I like very much to have the newest look and the best marques. It is important that I am cool with my friends and that my image is okay. Credibility is about looking good. C'est tout!

Other informants echoed this sentiment in relation to their sneakers. The emphasis among informants was on their fashion credibility, rather than street credibility. For instance, Mimi commented:

> Sneakers are part of my image. They are cute and I like to wear them. They can look sexy too, so, if I have sneakers that are in fashion, people will see me as sexy and chic. But it's like everything I have. I like to keep up and follow the look as it comes in.

The popular look among certain North African groups in the Côte d'azur area was a pair of sneakers worn with slightly short track pants. The short track pant revealed a sock and sneakers which had laces placed loosely in their holes on the shoe. Some owners did not tie their laces. This look was common and demonstrated the way in which sneakers were used to create a certain look which enhanced street status. While clothing and, to a minor extent, sneakers play a role in the identity expression in French street culture, these items carry differing signification from American street culture.

Clothing was, at times, also cited as having particular meaning to the individual. For instance, one informant, Jani, suggested that her

> brand of jeans are everything. In France, you must have the correct jeans and that's all. If you don't have the right kind, like Diesel or something, then you cannot be accepted. All of my friends are careful about their brand [of jeans]. It says that you are aware, you are cool and you have money. To us, it is important to have the right brand so that we can be admired everywhere by everyone.

This feedback regarding jeans demonstrated sensitivity to social acceptability in French society which is reflected in other expressions such as rap. For citizens who felt marginalized, the correct

choice of jeans brand was seen as a gateway to sociability in France. The display of money, brand awareness and the acquisition of fashionable labels perhaps equated to being seen as French.

Among the French informants interviewed, there appeared to be no similarities with America when it came to certain racially oriented values vested in sneaker consumption. One informant, Arnie, remarked that he "hated" American rap, hip hop and the entire American street culture and another informant, Pierre, worried about a perceived cultural take-over by American commercialism commenting, "it is like everything is American." Thus, while sneaker consumption in France appeared to symbolize and represent cultural capital in the form of social/image status (Thornton 1996), it did not reflect the same cultural discourses as those found in the urban or rap cultures of the United States. This suggests a more localized and nuanced view of consumption experiences and meanings that displays elements of absorption of overarching contemporary French culture.

Using rap in France as a mode of cultural expression

Rap as a mode of street expression is common to contemporary France and the United States. The processes of signification are similar to the extent that American and French rap genres are inhabited by artists who express the disenfranchisement of their people. It is important to understand, though, that the experiences of alienation are different between the two countries and rap narrates two diverse stories in two different languages. Artists such as Diam's, Mino and El Matador draw their visual influences from American rappers such as Snoop Dog, 50 Cent and NWA. Like American artists, French rappers use their music to express their social perspective which includes themes of religious, cultural and class alienation in France. In particular, the difficulties confronting young Muslim people in a traditional Christian society are narrated where "song after song dwells on the same themes of hopelessness, rejection by France, police harassment and the rage that follows" (Schofield 2005). Rapper Prodige Namor elaborates further:

> you have lots of people from Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, the Comoro Islands, and everybody wants to show who he is and where he comes from. It is a way to show who they are, what they want to prove. (Namor 2007)

Demarcation is felt through the complicated religious and racial prisms (of Muslim/Christian, black/white) where, as rapper La Peste comments, "There are two worlds crashing against each other. People have a problem with us, and we do with them" (Schofield 2005). Therefore, the content of French rap and the experience it narrates differs significantly from the American experience.

Fashion, rap, street culture and the de-symbolization of sneaker in France

French consumers who are connected with a French street culture were subject to the same obsession with fashion, image, status and appearance which echoes elements of the American experience. However, the French experience narrates the history of invasion, movement to the *métropole* and the bleak reality of life at odds with the historical, religious and cultural mores of their adopted culture. Rap "vent[s] the anger of an alienated underclass" (Poggoli 2007) in France who are concerned with racial and religious discrimination. Yet at the same time, as a postcolonial analysis would uncover, there are the strains of a contemporary French voice in the rejection of American fashion. The American experience speaks of capture, alienation from a

homeland by force, enslavement and the difficulties in finding affinity with white culture despite religious and cultural similarities. These two experiences, understood through a postcolonial interpretation, have produced two vastly different forms of rap expression and two different consumption cultures with their own signs and signifiers. A postcolonial analysis of the French experience could further illuminate some of the historical and cultural foundations for the emergence of today's street culture.

We suggest there are commodities or practices that signify and represent a specific French street sensibility. It is also important to acknowledge the vital role that postcolonial analysis could play in understanding the consumption practices of traditionally marginalized groups in France and elsewhere. Postcolonial analyses of French colonial history and its lingering impact on contemporary French culture have been central to understanding French society and its influences. Indeed, postcolonial theory itself finds many of its origins in French writers such as Memmi and Fanon, the founding fathers of postcolonialism. Our proposition here is that the French experience reinforces the case that the consumption of sneakers and, by extrapolation, the wider consumption of identity-creating goods are differently experienced by previously colonized groups depending on their historical and socio-cultural context.

Conclusion

Sneakers allegorize several important postcolonial tropes that appear within the discourse surrounding sneaker consumption in the black street culture of the United States. Through Run DMC's rebellion against the image of the African American as criminal, this historically embedded truism was appropriated and thus re-narrated by the street community. The fact of being African American or not wearing laces in your sneakers did not necessarily make one a criminal, any more than being on the plantation with white women in the midst made one a latent rapist. Laceless sneakers came to represent a rebellion against this traditional classification of the African-American male just as the rap genre itself enabled the street culture to tell its own stories of incarceration and victimization.

Sneakers have come to provide a way for the urban culture to garner a sense of both individual and collective identity which has offered them control over the production of their goods. The once marginalized street community now dictates the fashion direction of sneakers and holds the key to brand credibility among mainstream consumers. The urban milieu is not a space characterized by rejection and periphery. Instead, it is central to the culture-making practices of America and leads the way for the creation of fashion, music, advertising, art and discursive trends. The postcolonial counter-narrative of the streets now functions as a dominant narrative in corporate America. Finally, this evolution of a productive counter-narrative that has enabled the urban milieu to discursively re-situate itself in America's imagination has had impact on individuals. Sneakers allegorically involve the individual in a narrative of empowerment and reclamation which connects African-American street culture to a pivotal postcolonial trope. Our postcolonial interpretation of sneaker consumption among traditionally marginalized groups enables us to unearth these issues of reclamation, alienation, self-identity and the ascent of racially oriented counter-narrative within its specific context.

The postcolonial analysis of sneaker consumption excavates key narratives that are not initially apparent or intended in the documentary. Our postcolonial reading of the documentary presents an unacknowledged aspect of the film. It is clear that a postcolonial analysis of the film illuminates many important elements and places the documentary representation in a new light. The historical relevance of the violent African-American male stereotype, and its connection with laceless sneakers, mirrors Memmi and Fanon's identification of the faceless, oppressed colonized male in early postcolonial literature. The subsequent challenge for postcolonialism has

been to re-connect colonized subjects with their past, their language and their culture (Spivak 1988). Much postcolonial theory has suggested this re-connection occurs through literary, artistic, discursive and cultural narration. In one respect, this challenge is met by African-American street culture since it re-appropriates historically embedded stereotypes and allows the assumption of historical ownership.

Further, the subversion of the colonial voice and the construction of an empowered colonized narrative are central to postcolonial theory. This "call to cultural arms" is particularly apparent in the foundational works of Memmi, Fanon and Sartre. Indeed, Fanon extended his call to redress colonial inequality through violence if or as required. Subsequent artists and writers (Mudrooroo 1990, 1997; Okri 1992, 1999; Morrison 1999; Patke 2006) have contributed to the construction of a visible colonized voice in cultural and historical representation. We see this trope played out in the ascent of the "rap moguls" (Oliver 2006) who have penetrated white America and taken it for their own. This power penetration is allegorically felt across the street culture itself where, although individuals do not enjoy the same privilege as wealthy rappers, they are vested with a symbolic power and visible representation through their rap gods.

The importance of rap is also felt in French street culture where, again, the words of lauded rappers speak for, and to, a culture which finds itself at cultural, historical and religious odds with dominant French society. The fact that the subtle differences between American and French street culture are immediately clear shows how postcolonial analysis apprehends the shades and nuances of experiences and contextualizes them within specific historical, cultural and social parameters. Experience is culturally and chronologically particular and must be understood via its own social terms, historicity and processes of construction. This is clearly indicated in the contrasting French and African-American experiences. Each is driven by particular historical and cultural factors which produce a distinct sensibility. Postcolonialism brings a relatively unexplored theoretical perspective to marketing and cultivates a different theoretical underpinning for the way in which consumer research could perceive the consumption sensibilities of socially and historically marginalized groups.

Note

1. French informants largely conducted their interviews in French. The quotes provided are translated from the interview by one of the authors. Pseudonyms are used for the French informants.
2. The authors gratefully acknowledge the grant assistance of the Centre for Retail Research, Monash University in the preparation of this paper.

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