Cashmore, Ellis. "Introduction – "I sell entertainment"." *Beyond Black: Celebrity and Race in Obama's America*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 1–10. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781780931500.ch-001>>.

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Introduction – “I sell entertainment”

‘However unwittingly, black celebrities have sold the idea that America is no longer manacled to its history. It is a history pockmarked by racism, segregation and victimization.’

For his 2011 concert tour, Snoop Dogg appeared on stage against a backdrop of dollar signs, as if to confirm the meaning, purpose and sole ambition of the appearance. His mic was adorned with a gold knuckle-duster, reaffirming his links with a past rooted in internecine violence, imploding ghettos and gang executions. And security guards added a tart, if theatrical, touch, frisking all concertgoers for weapons. The status of ballpoint pens was uncertain: recall how Joe Pesci used one such pen in *Casino*.

Snoop’s first album *Doggystyle* was released in 1993. Before then he had hung with the Los Angeles Crips, and done time for possession. He had murder charges hanging over him until 1996, when he was cleared. Calvin Broadus aka Snoop Doggy Dogg swept to fame with the rise of gangsta rap, a music that was at once dangerous yet fascinating. It was black music enthusiastically embraced by whites. Few musicians ever got rich purveying the authentically gloomy, grueling nature of life in the inner city. Snoop probably realized this early on in his musical career.

By the time of *Doggumentary*, his eleventh studio album, Snoop had shamelessly adopted the same approach as his peers and sometime gangstas, such as 50 Cent and Jay-Z – an approach perhaps best summed-up by P. Diddy. “I sell entertainment,” he told Guy Adams, of the *Independent* newspaper (p. 19).

All black celebrities sell entertainment of one kind or other. It’s fundamental. If someone fails to engage consumers in a way the consumers find agreeable and gratifying, then they are destined never to be a celebrity. They also sell a seemingly endless range of commodities connected in some way to entertainment. And they sell ideas. All celebrities, regardless of ethnic background, offer a conception of the good life; a narrow conception perhaps, but an influential one just the same. It is a good life in which endless novelty, change and excitement are taken for granted and in which all known stimulants are available. Ambitions are structured around the possibility of possessing things, the newer the better. Celebrities personify this good life.

But black celebrities secrete additional ideas: about racism, the colorblind life and the arrival of the postracial society. Occasionally, they’ll speak explicitly

about these matters. Very occasionally: for the most part, they remain silent, as if subdued by the overpowering demands of behaving with good grace so as not to incite controversy or resentment. Even a once-provocative figure like Snoop (2011 earnings: \$8.55 million/£5.5 million) is careful to make his ghetto posturing transparently that – behavior intended to impress or mislead.

Most of us enjoy being entertained by musicians, actors, and sports stars. We might begrudge them the often staggering amounts of money they earn, but this doesn't stop us buying downloads, going to the movies or paying our tv subscriptions. Watching Denzel Washington in a film doesn't prompt us to think about how, today, there are many, many more African American movie stars in lead roles than there were twenty years ago. And it certainly doesn't make us wonder whether Washington is representative of a new generation of high-achieving African Americans.

In 1998, before Beyoncé had gone solo, when Michael Jackson was still alive and the same year writer Toni Morrison hailed Bill Clinton as “our first black president,” historian Jacqueline Jones wrote: “We find nothing incongruous in appreciating the talents of African-American entertainers and professional athletes (male and female), who are paid millions of dollars each year, while accepting the apparent fact that millions of black men, women, and children are doomed to languish in impoverished communities, without the educational credentials and work opportunities that provide access to the blessings of a high-tech society” (p. 234).

Jones was right: we don't find incongruity. There is none: being entertained by black celebrities is perfectly in harmony with accepting what Jones called the “apparent fact” that the overwhelming majority of African Americans fail to make progress or achieve success of any substantial kind. The fact is actual rather than apparent, and it remains, as I will show in chapter 12. However unwittingly, black celebrities have sold the idea that America is no longer manacled to its history. It is a history pockmarked by racism, segregation and victimization. Undeniable progress since civil rights has promoted the ideal of what many call the postracial society, a place where racism and other forms of bigotry have no purchase. The election of Barack Obama, himself a political celebrity (as I will soon argue in detail), seemed to validate if not the arrival, then the imminence of the postracial society.

Black celebrities are definitely creating an impression. But in what sense are we using “impression”? An effect, an imitation, an idea, feeling or opinion formed without conscious thought or with little evidence? This is one of the questions we might ask about black celebrities and, as the reader might already be anticipating, it leads logically to several related questions, all of which I'll address in the eleven chapters that follow. Before moving to them, I'll offer an outline.

Chapter 2: Prominent African Americans now populate politics, as well as entertainment and sports – the two spheres where they have traditionally excelled. In practically every area of today’s society, there are black people who are not just successful, but visibly, sometimes ostentatiously successful. Earl Ofari Hutchinson discerned that Tiger Woods’ success in particular had been interpreted as “final proof that America is a colorblind society, and discrimination mostly a figment of the warped imaginations of many African-Americans.” Obama’s political success presumably added to the weight of evidence. It’s a powerful argument and one deserving closer attention.

In this second chapter, I namecheck many of the figures I will discuss in detail in subsequent chapters. Clearly Obama’s impact has been considerable, as has that of the woman who endorsed, blessed and all but canonized him. Oprah Winfrey and Obama are among the many African Americans who have publicly reflected on their own prodigiously successful careers and, at times, on how they managed to navigate their ways to the top. They share with other conspicuous African Americans awareness of racism, but as an inconvenience rather than insurmountable obstacle. “It is like rain. You know you’re going to get wet so grab your umbrella and get up and go out to work.” Robert L. Johnson’s attitude is widely shared.

I use this chapter to establish themes that recur in one way or another throughout the book. Celebrities thrive in consumer culture; in fact, their existence is predicated on the desire to buy and possess products. Beyoncé, more than any other celebrity, epitomizes this. She can, it seems, sell anything to anybody.

Chapter 3: It sounds disparaging to describe Barack Obama as a brand. His critics have done just this and intended it as an insult. Is it? A brand is typically a type of product designed, manufactured and distributed to consumers. But it also resonates among a population: it evokes images and emotions, usually of high quality. Can any politician today afford to dispense with the kind of brand-building processes associated with showbusiness entertainers?

Obama’s election as president in 2008 “uncorked a virulent racism,” as Julianne Malveaux put it. She means that there was widespread displeasure that a black man could actually lead the nation. Widespread, perhaps; but far from unanimous. The attitudes, sentiments and beliefs that carried Obama to power were approving of a black politician who adamantly refused either to disguise his own background or broach racial issues on the campaign. Obama’s election happened at a particular node where America’s pathways intersected. Hurricane Katrina, Oprah and what the writer Shelby Steele sees as America’s attempt to purify itself of racism, sexism and militarism were all influences.

Chapter 4: When Oprah Winfrey tells a population, “I am here to tell you to think,” they do apparently think. She really did say this and her audience duly thought about who was the best person to occupy the presidency of the United States. Oprah was – perhaps remains – one of the most influential people in the world and the source of her influence is in the unique status

she has acquired since 1986, when her history-making show first appeared on national television.

Oprah used her own life as a preacher uses a parable – to illustrate a moral, perhaps even spiritual, lesson. She told it many times, never as a neutral chronicle, always as an instruction. So Oprah would readily engage with racial issues, as she would any other controversial topic, but always finishing with a simple reminder that the solutions lie inside. People should follow Oprah's example and help themselves. If they carped and complained about the world, they would get nowhere.

Oprah's critics rounded on her, accusing her of naivety in encouraging individual over social change. But her psychobabble about self-actualization made great tv and helped establish her as "an Horatio Alger for our times," as one writer put it. Oprah's philosophy of individualism chimed well with the changing times; a kind of voyeurism seemed to change America's soul, turning its denizens into peeping toms and guiltless eavesdroppers on others' private conversations. As with all the figures who feature in this book, Oprah has to be understood in context.

Chapter 5: Bill Cosby brought to life what couldn't readily be seen in actuality: black people living like whites. I should probably stress *readily*. There were many well-heeled, aspirational bourgeois African Americans; they just didn't appear much on television. Cosby was an iconoclast, in the sense that he attacked beliefs and images that had been cherished for generations and perpetuated through the media in shows that featured African Americans in only a very narrow range of roles. Cosby's innovation was in creating a fictional family that had none of the usual characteristics associated with blacks. The Huxtable family, as they were called, was headed by a doctor, with a lawyer as his wife and children who were aiming to be successful in an orthodox way rather than as a successful pimp or drug dealer.

In the 1980s, it looked as if Cosby had been granted license to do and say as he wished: his mold-breaking show was the most popular on television and he pontificated, occasionally dogmatically, particularly on the condition of African Americans. In the 2000s, he seemed in danger of having that license revoked. Still popular, but fading in the collective memory, he roared back into the headlines with a series of speeches and talks, the theme of which was condensed into a single phrase: "blame the poor." It was an undeserved abridgement of what was actually a more formal and substantial extension of what many other prominent black people had been arguing for years. Since the days of W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), in fact.

Like Oprah, Cosby preached individualism: the principle of being independent and self-reliant and favoring freedom of action for individuals over state control. At the core of Cosby's philosophy was "personal responsibility." Blaming racism, whites or more abstract forces for the persistent inequalities in American society had become an easy option, as far as Cosby was concerned. He struck a chord with many, but jarred with many others.

Cosby’s impact is undeniable, but the nature of his influence or effect and on whom or what is not certain. As a way of assessing this, I set Cosby’s seminal show in its historical context, tracing back the presence of black people in American television. This is the only way we can reliably understand Cosby’s cultural significance.

Chapter 6: In the church of celebrity, Michael Jackson occupied a status comparable with the Pope or the Dalai Lama. Even after death, he remains the spiritual leader of a worldwide movement and commands the devotion of legions. In the 1960s, when Jackson first emerged as a precocious, gifted child, Cosby was playing Robert Culp’s sidekick in a tv show called *I Spy*, civil rights legislation had only just been passed and MTV was two decades from its launch. The tv channel, which is now global, was instrumental in Jackson’s ascent, and, indeed, the ascent of celebrity culture.

Imagine Jackson as a figure in a Jean-Michel Basquiat artwork: the figure itself is interesting enough, but what *makes* it interesting is all the stuff that’s going on around it. Jackson is both a product of a particular period in history and a character who helped make that period. It’s hard to imagine that television channels avoided black artists as recently as 1983 – the year before the launch of Cosby’s show. Jackson’s record company had to campaign for his music to be featured on the influential MTV playlists.

Looking back to the 1980s, Jackson’s rise is astonishing. After his surge to fame as a child, a likely career arc would have been a return to obscurity, followed by traumatized teens and a struggle against dependency of some sort. Not many child stars (and no black child stars) continue to rise as they mature. Jackson’s specialness derived from his music and presentation, of course. But only partly: much of the fascination with Jackson had its source in his idiosyncrasies. He was a black man, who seemed to want to remain in an artificial state of childhood, surround himself with the kinds of things children like, and collect objects that grown men would usually not find interesting (the bones of the Elephant Man, for example).

Even in death, Jackson’s appeal is perplexing. In this chapter, I make sense of it. I argue that Jackson’s admittance to the celebrity pantheon was conditional. His oddities served to keep him in consumers’ minds, but they also distinguished him in a way that turned him into visible reminder: a figure who was distinct and different, and caused people to remember what they were not. What some writers call the Other. Love him, hate him, admire or disparage him, Jackson was one of the most reclusive yet revealing characters on the postwar American landscape.

Chapter 7: Some considered Jackson weird and wonderful; others, just weird. Shortly after his death in 2009, countless commentators asked, “How will Michael Jackson be remembered?” For his music? Dancing? Videos? Or his bizarre predilections? People were justifiably curious about Jackson. He was a most singular figure. Then again, whites have been curious about black people

for a long time. The curiosity dates back to slave days when white audiences would clamor to watch clumsy re-enactments of life on the plantations put to music. The same desire to know or learn about black life manifested in subsequent generations, often in popular entertainment.

Entertainment is never *just* the provision of amusement or enjoyment and, in this chapter, I explore how black entertainers have both profited and suffered as a result of their popularity with whites. Often dehumanized, occasionally fêted, black performers and exhibits – yes, exhibits – have captivated white audiences since the early nineteenth century and perhaps before. Entertainment has long been one of the two areas in which African Americans have been permitted to excel. Sports is the other area. In both, blacks have performed for the delectation of whites. They have frequently become rich and famous in the process; but they have been at the service of whites, behaving in a way that provides pleasure and an agreeable diversion. Of course, all showbusiness performers do the same. Many black performers sensed the dangers of popular entertainment: they were serious artists who refused to submit themselves to degrading “buffoonery,” as the historian Thomas Boskin calls it. One such artist was Paul Robeson and I spend time examining the career of this performer extraordinaire. A commanding bass-baritone, Shakespearean actor and film star, Robeson was eventually humbled.

Robeson’s life was, in many ways, cautionary: he used his popularity to launch a surprise on an unwary population. Robeson strayed far from his stage, into the world of politics, labor and civil affairs. He was considered persona non grata and, for a while, became the subject of an FBI investigation. His fortunes issued a lesson: the activities of black entertainers were monitored and circumscribed. They were supposed to entertain. Nothing more. Success for black entertainers and, for that matter, athletes was strictly conditional.

It may have seemed like progress when black entertainers began appearing on Broadway, in Hollywood movies and on tv screens. But it was a kind of chimerical progress, something hoped-for but, in fact, illusory. Female artists, in particular, were squeezed into recognizable roles that bore traces of traditional racist stereotypes. If they resisted, as Lena Horne frequently did, they were left to waste. In this chapter, I describe a second American dilemma, one facing black artists with an eye on popular success: pander to whites’ appetite for buffoonery and song, or risk withering. It is a dilemma that still hasn’t satisfactorily been resolved.

Chapter 8: The entertainer’s job was once to offer diversion, amusement and enjoyment to audiences. Now, the brief has expanded: they have to sell. Not just tickets, but all manner of products and services, many of which have no realistic connection to the entertainer’s expertise. In fact, that expertise may *itself* be selling. Consumer culture intersects with practically every theme in this book. Celebrities themselves are living advertisements, not just for the commodities they peddle, but for the life they portray – and to which consumers aspire.

Black consumers aspire differently from most: according to research, they buy membership into mainstream society. “Consuming rebuts racism,” Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár discovered during their 2001 study “How blacks use consumption to shape their collective identity” (p. 41). It’s a perplexing conclusion, but one that will make sense in the context of this book.

It also helps us make sense of the rise of Tyra Banks, a one-time model who migrated into television as one of the many possible successors to Oprah. Banks’ efforts to occupy a place on a catwalk dominated by white models in the 1990s offers a real-life allegory about the narrow gaps available to blacks in a business that is essentially a humongous advertisement for high-end clothes and everything that wearing them signifies.

Naomi Campbell must have heard Banks’ froufrou behind her: in 1987 the London-born model became the first black subject to appear on the cover of the French edition of *Vogue*. According to Banks’ own reading of the situation, Campbell was less than thrilled by the prospect of having another black supermodel join her. Banks grew weary and later revealed to Campbell, “I was tired of having to deal with you.” Their rivalry – though Campbell wouldn’t call it that – supplied the raw material for gossip columns, and that is no bad thing for celebrities; in fact, it’s a valuable resource. But it also illustrated how the number of places available for black celebrities in any given sphere is limited.

Banks stepped out of modeling and into television. She was still selling, but this time different kinds of commodities and services. Her specialty item was transformation: anyone can change, seemed to be her communiqué. For aspirational African Americans, this had reverb: in the 1960s and 1970s, black people massed on the streets protesting against racism; in the 1980s and 1990s, they assembled, though usually over specific issues, like the Rodney King riots of 1992, or the Million Man March of 1995. In the 2000s, another option emerged: buy stuff. The kind of good life personified by celebrities might not have been within grasp but it didn’t stop consumers reaching for it. Reaching, in this instance, involves consuming the kinds of good visibly displayed by celebrities. It is also in line with the kind of individualist ethos pronounced by Oprah, Cosby and practically every other black celebrity who has risen to the A-list. When, in 2001, Lamont and Molnár titled their study “How blacks use consumption to shape their collective identity,” they suggested the special powers shopping had for blacks. This chapter uses Banks as a kind of lens through which to scrutinize the importance of commodities for African Americans and the role of black celebrities in promoting and maintaining avid consumption. In a way, consumption has offered an alternative to challenge.

Chapter 9: Has there ever been a music that elevates, exalts, extols and makes manifest the glory of money? Rap’s acceptance of consumption as a way to happiness has complemented the clustering of aspirations around acquiring money and material things. Leading exponents, including the figure mentioned

at the start of this chapter, have made no secret of their ambitions. “I see money as a facilitator,” 50 Cent told Kaleem Aftab. Facilitator for what? Saving the planet? Ending war? Finding the cure for untreatable diseases? No: “If airlines don’t have a plane that goes to where you want to go, a private jet will.”

Hip-hop culture brought forth a music that found the pulse of black American life. That was in the 1980s when thoughts were on police oppression rather than private jets (“Try to never backpedal from the power some go to get a nigger shot,” Public Enemy, 1990). Rap became reassuringly domesticated. Reassuring, that is, for those who had seen it as threatening malefaction rather than bracing critique.

Hip-hop’s transition occupies the first part of this chapter, which is concerned with the evolution of what has become popularly known as “black music.” The term itself is questionable: it suggests some pure form of music originated and purveyed by African Americans. The blues, jazz, R&B, soul and some other kinds of music have been regarded as such. Artists specializing in one or more of these have been respectfully acknowledged, though none has ever received the kind of global recognition of more recent hip-hop artists. Hip-hop became the dominant black music of the late 1990s and 2000s. Its success reflected the enduring fascination whites have with black culture. Was it a wholesome fascination or something rather less edifying?

Chapter 10: Music has been one of two fields of endeavor where black people have been allowed to excel, sports being the other. I could emphasize *allowed*: whites have assented to African Americans’ entry into these areas, while forbidding them access to more orthodox areas of society. But there are hidden conditions that I uncover in this chapter.

The chapter’s title, “The ghetto inside”, is taken from the words of one of Michael Vick’s neighbors, who reflected on the football player’s entanglement in dogfighting. “They moved out of the ghetto,” said the neighbor of Vick and his friends. “But the ghetto is still in them.” Maybe the sentiment isn’t widely shared. Maybe it is. Either way, it hasn’t hurt the marketability of African American sports stars: since the late 1990s, the spirit of Nike has gently guided sports into the entertainment business and turned athletes into fully formed celebrities. Nike was assisted by many helpers, the most influential being media corporations that hastened the implacable advance of celebrity culture. Sports, it seems, have been on an audiovisual loop for at least 20 years. Repetitious to some, spellbinding to most, competition has become a staple of entertainment in the 21st century. And Nike’s footprints are all over.

In Michael Jordan, Nike constructed a perfect emblem: a black man endowed with extraordinary physical prowess who could enchant consumers, but never induced them to think of much beyond basketball or burgers. Helán E. Page uses the phrase “embraceable male blackness” to capture the kind of quality Jordan and any number of other black athletes embodied. Not including Mike Tyson: he engendered a similar kind of response as Vick; an African American

man who used his sporting gift to earn millions then regressed. So where does that leave Tiger Woods on the embraceability scale? Or Kobe Bryant? Once lauded, then despised, then, at least in Bryant’s case, lauded again, both manifested signs of regression.

For decades, even centuries, people have rhapsodized over black athletes, as they have black singers. Glancing back, we understand the difference between appreciation and respect: audiences were grateful for the opportunity to witness black athletes’ outstanding physical feats and acknowledge what many suspected were natural gifts; but they did not have due regard for their feelings, beliefs, wishes, rights or ambitions.

Chapter 11: All black celebrities are political figures. At least, in the way Armond White uses political figures, celebrities who “reflect the way we think about race, masculinity, humor, violence and fantasy.” White is referring specifically to Will Smith, an interesting character who indulged his flair for hip-hop and sitcom before becoming one of Hollywood’s leading male actors. I open this chapter by contrasting Smith with Wesley Snipes, another leading man, though one with an altogether different political presence. Every black public figure invites us, perhaps compels us, to think about beliefs and principles, about status and authority. They do not always intend to: who they are, what they do, the roles they play and the images they convey all influence our thinking. When they actually say something, we take notice.

Earlier in the book in chapter 7, I recognize the nineteenth-century minstrel shows as the *fons et origo* of whites’ interest in theatrical depictions of black life. In this chapter, I reveal how changing depictions of black life have political dimensions. Up to recently, black entertainers have been restricted to themes, characters and plotlines that convey the raw material for popular thinking. When African Americans appear on the screen, on the playing field or onstage, they are affecting how others think not just about them, but about a range of issues. I risk taxing the reader’s patience, but it’s worth reminding ourselves once more: entertainment is never *just* the provision of amusement or enjoyment.

Every so often, a black celebrity speaks out for or against something or other. Cosby occasioned outrage, as did Kanye West. So, when Halle Berry decided to invoke the “one-drop rule” some sort of political quarrel was bound to ensue. Berry’s remarks, which conjured up memories of slavery and miscegenation, were widely reported and, at first blush, sounded a crude and retrograde blurt. On closer inspection, her words were a considered and intelligent political comment on what being black means in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 12: Is whiteness normal? No one would dare say so, but for nearly four centuries that’s been a popular, if unspoken assumption. Starting the final chapter of a book entitled *Beyond Black* with a discussion of whiteness sounds perverse, but it’s actually essential. Without an examination of how whiteness was invented – yes, *invented* – the rest of the book would be meaningless. My logic is simple: there are no racial groups, no blacks, whites or any other

kind of grouping that we have not created ourselves. Human beings do not fall naturally into pre-established categories: we have framed those categories, filled them and, over the years, loaded them with meanings. Unless there was a population of people we call white, there would be no black. So no black sportsmen, black actors, or black celebrities. And yet, as the reader will see, there were once no black people at all; nor whites.

The concluding chapter doesn't try to bring everything together in some specious homogeneity: this book is about a subject that defies glib conclusions. The narrative thread that ties everything together is, of course, the black celebrity, but this is a social-cultural chronicle that should leave the readers pondering more questions, one of which might be: "Do we live in a postracial society?"

The very phrase signals a time when race has disappeared, left behind in the vapor trail of history. The election of Barack Obama in 2008 indicated that, even if the postracial society had not materialized, there was at least evidence that it may do so over the next several years. But, if the postracial society is approaching, why is so much of America structured in a way that makes it deeply racially divided? In this chapter, I present a portrait of America's racial divisions; they are divisions that torture flagbearers for the postracial future. Race and the racism it fosters have been organizing principles of American society and, while the most obvious instances of them have gone, there remains evidence that they maintain a surreptitious presence.

Black celebrities are, by definition, successful: they have managed, in their own ways, to overcome the kind of barriers that countless other black people fail to surmount. In this sense, they serve notice that America, though once hostile to blacks, is a more welcoming place. To extend Johnson's metaphor, black celebrities have put on their raincoats, taken a precautionary umbrella and decided to brave the elements.

The chapters are interconnected rather than organized around a theory or proposition. Readers won't find chronological progression or genre-specific chapters: this is not a history of black entertainers. Even the chapters focusing on particular figures, such as Oprah, Bill Cosby and Michael Jackson, are as much about their times as lives. The book time-shuttles from the nineteenth century to the present day, and all points in between. It makes incongruous bedfellows of diverse characters, gathering movie stars and politicians in the same chapters with tv figures and jazz singers. And it ends shamelessly with a conclusion that is indefinite and lacking in assurance. It is a deficiency for which the reader will, I suspect, find justification in the preceding eleven chapters.