Cashmore, Ellis. "Sideshow and carnival barkers." *Beyond Black: Celebrity and Race in Obama's America*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 11–21. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781780931500.ch-002>>.

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Sideshowes and carnival barkers

'Look around you: not only can we boast a black president, we have Jay-Z, the world's foremost rapper, Oscar winner Halle Berry, Jamie Foxx, Beyoncé, Kobe Bryant ... we could go on.'

“My general point is this: we are living in a very serious time, and America has huge potential and opportunity to seize the twenty-first century. We're only gonna get there though if we have a serious conversation about the things that matter to people: jobs and gas prices and how we bring down the deficit, how do we deal with the changes going on in the world. We can't be distracted by sideshows and, as I said at my press conference, carnival barkers, who are going around trying to get attention.”

Barack Obama was responding to a question from Oprah Winfrey, who, in May 2011, wondered why he had chosen to produce his detailed birth certificate from Hawaii and distribute it to the media. Persistent claims about the legitimacy of his citizenship had been circulating for over two years. “Silliness,” Obama called it. Oprah seemed to agree, inviting him to widen his argument: “Do you think that there's a disconnection in general in terms of sideshows and carnival barkers?” she asked, extending his analogy for the gossip media. A carnival barker is someone who stood at the entrance of the traveling entertainment shows that were popular in the nineteenth century, loudly announcing the offerings to the crowds.

Is America living in the real world? Not to judge by its President. Obama, his admirers used to say, was careful, deliberative and admirably reluctant to rush to conclusions, but, in this instance, he was fast and definite: “The line between entertainment and politics has blurred and so reality tv is seeping into how we think about our politics.”

It was meant as a criticism, or at least a sardonic reflection. Yet the President of the United States was speaking not at a press briefing or in the context of a presidential address, but on *Oprah*, the highest-rated television talk show in history; a show that, at its peak, pulled in 42 million viewers and even in its final stages drew six million. It was syndicated to over 140 countries around the world. Obama may have understood the irony of his pronouncement, but it didn't seem that way. All the same, it was a breathtakingly impudent remark to make on one of the world's foremost citadels of mass entertainment. The line between entertainment and politics has blurred.

Perhaps it was a sly acknowledgment of the unenviable trade-offs of contemporary politics: any prospective politician who isn't prepared to engage with the entertainment industry is condemned to remain exactly that – a prospective politician and not an actual one. Obama demonstrably was prepared to engage, as his presence on Oprah's show bore testimony. He even brought along his wife, Michelle, who contributed almost as much as he did to the conversation. He was, after all, making a statement and simultaneously proving the truth of that statement.

In one apparently throwaway remark, Barack Obama, elected President of the United States in 2008, gifted us an argument that, twenty years before, would have been preposterous and unbelievable. Why preposterous and unbelievable? Even in the early 1990s, there was nothing contrary to reason or commonsense in declaring that politics was edging closer to entertainment. A glance on YouTube at a Ray-Banned Bill Clinton playing "Heartbreak Hotel" on tenor sax on the Arsenio Hall Show in 1992 will remind anyone of that.

No, the unbelievable part lay not in the content of the remark, but in the person who made it and the company in which he made it. Even in the run-up to the historic 2008 election, many believed the USA would never cross a kind of political threshold and elect an African American president. Despite decades of post-civil-rights progress in politics and the rise to prominence of people like Jesse Jackson, who himself ran presidential campaigns in 1984 and 1988, the idea of a black president seemed remote.

Even more magically, Obama was not interviewed by a man, but by a woman. Not even a white woman; an African American woman who could lay every legitimate claim to being the most influential female, perhaps person, on the planet. And to make this interview more compellingly entertaining and showbusinesslike, the president brought his wife. Three black people, sitting on a couch. A president, and a black president at that, appearing with his wife, another black woman, at the time rated by *Forbes* as the most powerful woman in the world, on the world's most-watched and best-known talk show, hosted by the world's most famous and wealthiest woman, a black woman, and explaining why he needed to prove his American nativeness by reference to the lack of distinctness between politics and entertainment.

Collectively, they contrived a new and, in many ways, unexpected image of a cultural landscape where the time-honored tribulation of race no longer mattered; what some call a postracial society. Remember: less than 50 years before, Medgar Evers, a black civil rights activist from Decatur, Mississippi, was shot dead by racists while involved in trying to change the segregationist policy of the University of Mississippi.

"For African-Americans the Obama presidency is the fulfillment of what once was thought to be the impossible dream," wrote Wayne A. Jones and Douglas J. Fiore in their 2009 article, "We're confusing the black kids and scaring the white kids." "No longer do African-American children have to

grow up with the perception that obtaining the highest elective office in the land is totally elusive" (p.13).

From the outset, Obama was freighted with the burdens of history. "It seems reasonable for one to view Obama's election as the beginning of a post-racial America," wrote Anthony L. Brown and Keffrelyn D. Brown in the academic journal *Race, Gender and Class*, in 2010. But only "reasonable" if you accept that "racism is solely located in the actions of individual, aberrant people rather than actions situated in and supported by historical, discursive and institutional practises" (p.124).

Both points are, of course, crucial, as is the reference to an America where race and, we presume, racism have become irrelevant. It does seem reasonable to visualize Obama as the man who broke the dam of oppression, discrimination, exploitation and, often, naked brutality that had been leaking for years, but needed one final, thunderous onslaught before it finally disintegrated. But it seems less reasonable to charge one individual with the responsibility for changing a set of social and cultural institutions that have been given specific shape and substance for over four hundred years, and which, according to some, continue to make ogres or victims of everyone.

A third point could be that Obama is but one character in a drama that had been playing for a number of years before his election victory. Maybe the others didn't have the social authority that comes with political office, but consider the impact of the person asking the questions in the sideshows and carnival barkers interview. Oprah proved that, while blackness was and may still be an impediment to advancement, it's not an immovable obstruction, or, if it is, there are ways around it.

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In the 25 years ending with her last show on May 25, 2011, Oprah had humanized a fantasy, that fantasy being that a black woman could create a global industry, become one of the richest people in the world and even inspire new entries in our dictionaries: Oprahification; The O-Factor. More than any other contemporary figure, Oprah Winfrey cut through America's racial divides. When she emerged on her own tv show on September 8, 1986, she was an improbable emblem for a new society: a slightly podgy black woman in raspberry-colored outfit, her hair coiffed into one of those big eighties do's. Over 4,000 episodes later, Oprah, at 57, quit the daily grind of the talk show, with billions in the bank and an annual income estimated by *Forbes* at \$300m.

When *The Oprah Winfrey Show* started there were plenty of high-profile black figures, though most fitted historical types. The kind of disempowered characters described by the title of Donald Bogle's book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, first published in 1973, were still abundant in films. And musically, African Americans were locked into specific genres. But fresh options were appearing. None were fresher than the role of a well-heeled

gynecologist with an equally well-heeled wife, also a professional, with a high-spirited, quarrelsome but recognizably normal home life.

The sting of *The Bill Cosby Show* was its authenticity: it suggested there were black people whose lives were not stricken by the maladies and multiple pathologies typically associated with African Americans. Cosby had been on tv since the 1960s when he featured in *I Spy*, but his *The Bill Cosby Show*, which started in 1984, offered a tableau of black characters that was, in its way, iconoclastic; it was also compulsively watchable, running until 1992 and, for four years, topping the viewer ratings. In the 1980s, Cosby was a singular entertainer: he grandstanded shamelessly, making himself likeable to audiences and, by implication, to advertisers, who used his gift to sell their wares.

Cosby proved many things, not least of which was that audiences are prepared to work for their enlightenment. He offered an unusual image of a conservative family man, normal in all respects but one – he was black. Being white is what Howard Winant calls the “default racial status”; it is the norm in America, as I will argue later. But bear with me. In several respects, Cosby was just like one of those standard issue black comedians: an unapologetically happy jester whose main purpose in life seemed to be to amuse whites. But in other respects, he issued a challenge. His character seemed to say: I’m affluent, live in a smart home, have a well-ordered family and live in comfort, not unlike some whites, in fact; so now what have you got to laugh at? And then he made audiences laugh.

So, by the time of Oprah’s arrival, American consumers had at least glimpsed a black male entertainer who didn’t conform to popular expectations. But outside Cosby there was familiarity. Prodigiously gifted black musical and sports stars had been around for the whole of the twentieth century. In the 1980s, Michael Jackson was the most conspicuous and, for some, the most gifted. In 1983, Jackson had become the first ever African American artist to feature on MTV, then a 24-hour music channel. Jackson cast a spell that endured after his death.

In sport, Mike Tyson was wielding his own kind of influence on audiences. His brand of primitivism in the ring was a reminder of blacks’ extraordinarily destructive prowess. Michael Jordan alternated near-miraculous basketball with completely miraculous salesmanship. In many ways the alkali to Tyson’s acid, Jordan induced consumers not just to spend money on products that he endorsed, but convince them that it was empowering to do so.

More mold-breakers were to come. Denzel Washington was a relatively obscure black actor – his breakthrough role as Steve Biko in *Cry Freedom* came in 1987. Rappers were beginning to emerge: Run-DMC’s version of Aerosmith’s “Walk this way” became an international success in 1986, making audiences stand back with respectful awe and take notice of an interesting and relatively new genre known then simply as hip-hop.

The range of images of black people broadened with the arrival of Colin Powell, a New York-born son of Jamaican migrants, who served in the military and was promoted to the rank of General and selected as Chairman of the

Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest military position, in 1989. Praised as the leader of Operation Desert Storm in the first Gulf War, 1991, Powell was a handsome and stellar performer on tv. He later declared himself a Republican and even contemplated a presidential campaign before taking up the position of Secretary of State, a position later occupied by Condoleezza Rice.

By the time Oprah decided to leave her leather sofa for good, black people had ascended in practically every part of American society. Traditionally restricted to success in sports and entertainment, African Americans excelled in politics, commerce, industry, the military and everywhere else. So it's easy to see how the impression of the postracial society gained credence: it's not just that your MP3 player is full of tracks by black artists, or that every movie you see has black lead actors, or even that all your favorite sports are dominated by black players; it's that your boss is black, your state governor is black, your accountant is black and your local bank has a black manager.

If this sounds like an exaggerated and distorted characterization, consider the conclusions of Stanford University scholars, Gary M. Segura and Ali A. Valenzuela in their 2010 article for *Presidential Studies Quarterly*: "The decline of old-fashioned racism – belief in the inferiority of blacks – and a corresponding rise in racial egalitarianism have been amply demonstrated in the literature of American public attitudes" (p. 502).

Even if this doesn't equate exactly to the vision of the postracial society, it comes close: the principle that all people are equally deserving of rights and opportunities – what Segura and Valenzuela call racial egalitarianism – has risen in popularity as archaic forms of bigotry have receded into America's past. The deep-seamed racism that made the country hell-on-earth for black people and split the nation in myriad ways, socially, geographically, even psychologically, was, it seems, disappearing. A country once as starkly and formally divided as a chessboard is now much more like a Eugene J. Martin collage or Jackson Pollock abstract.

"Americans view race through a prism of culture." So claims John Hartigan Jr. in his 2009 article, "What are you laughing at?" He doesn't deny that there are countless occasions when what he calls "the racial dimension of daily life" are glaringly transparent. But race has become less and less visible. So much so that Hartigan solemnly reports, "The worst thing that you can be labeled these days is a racist" (p.15).

Hartigan reckons his first point about "the prism of culture" hardly needs stating, but perhaps it's not quite as obvious as he thinks. He presumably means that we look at the world from our own particular viewpoints, each a product of our background and present position. We have perspectives, in other words. Hartigan's slightly troubling point is that most of us see a distorted image of society. Nowadays, it's difficult to show "Americans how widely and deeply race continues to matter" (p.15).

Why? Hartigan doesn't offer an answer. Let me try. In 1998, shortly after Tiger Woods had won his first Masters and instantly became a global celebrity, Earl Ofari Hutchinson wrote perceptively in the *New Pittsburgh Courier*: "While many whites sincerely cheered Tiger for his triumphs, many others twisted his success into final proof that America is a colorblind society, and discrimination mostly a figment of the warped imaginations of many African-Americans" (p. A7).

The years since haven't dulled Hutchinson's argument; if anything, they've sharpened it. Woods is now just one of an entire generation of conspicuously successful black American celebrities; they are abundant, superabundant you might say. They are parts of an elite group of African Americans whose wealth, glamor, flamboyance and even moral authority has positioned them, whether they like it or not, as "proof of the colorblind society," to repeat Hutchinson.

Obama and Oprah are just two of the many African Americans who have been forcefully demonstrative: they've served as persuasive evidence. "Since Obama won the presidency, this national hunger for racial optimism is overflowing with self-congratulation," writes Thomas F. Pettigrew in his 2011 commentary, "Post-racism?" (p. 279).

The self-congratulation goes beyond allowing oneself a few bouquets for being enlightened enough to elect a black president: it's an almost audible cry of "Bravo! We did it. We finally laid racism to rest. Need proof? Look around you: not only can we boast a black president, we have Jay-Z, the world's foremost rapper, Oscar winner Halle Berry, Jamie Foxx, Beyoncé, Kobe Bryant ... we could go on." Each of them earns more in a year than the gross turnover of a medium-sized petrochemical company. Their talent and the opulent lifestyle it brings them are the envy of everyone.

There's logic to this kind of reasoning. And it guides a further proposition: if these and other successful African Americans have faced the obstacles strewn across their paths by discrimination and prejudice and still managed to come out on top, why can't others? Oprah is exemplary: born to poor parents, abused as a child, lacking any kind of obvious talent – by which I mean proficiency in sports, or entertainment – or strikingly good looks, she scaled the heights with a combination of perseverance and a refusal to be thwarted by anyone or anything.

Although she didn't say it, there's little doubt Oprah would agree with the founder of BET (Black Entertainment Television) and fellow billionaire Robert L. Johnson, who, in a 2004 interview, grasped the importance of racism like this: "You know you are going to get hit with it, but you don't let it stop you from trying to be the best you can be at what you do. I never give up because I am going to run into racism" (p. 116). Depending on your perspective, his metaphor is either banal or brilliant: "It is like rain. You know you're going to get wet so grab your umbrella and get up and get out to work" (p.116).

Johnson and the other black celebrities are emblems of self-help. They're not naïve: racism hasn't evaporated in a matter of a few years. But, for them, it is like rain; unpleasant and unwelcome (except by farmers), but not debilitating. Once there were floods, then there were storms, but now there are just showers, perhaps drizzle. And it isn't only the fabulously rich African Americans who believe this, as research by Helen A. Neville et al. in 2005 confirms. One of the several important points made by Neville and her colleagues is that the "set of beliefs that serves to minimize, ignore, and/or distort the existence of race and racism" and that "racism is a thing of the past and that race and racism do not play an important role in current social and economic realities" is by no means the preserve of whites (p. 29). Many African Americans also subscribe.

Even skeptical scholars, such as Ben Pitcher, warn, "It is a mistake to view the sea change in American culture that permitted the election of a black president as an anomalous event, or as motivated solely by a weakly held abeyance to a momentarily fashionable social liberalism" (p. 356). In his 2010 article "White no longer," Pitcher contends the result of the 2008 election contained "an important statement of collective intent."

Pitcher believes an "ontological transformation in US culture" is in process, by which I infer a dramatic change in the whole nature of American society. A change to what some call the postracial society. So Hartigan's argument about the difficulty in reminding America how "widely and deeply race continues to matter" makes sense. There are too many models of black success to dismiss them as tokens or aberrant individuals. They constitute a body of evidence.

After Obama had finished explaining to Oprah how entertainment values had seeped into politics, she referred to the epic PBS documentary series *Eyes on the Prize*, which recounted the struggle of the civil rights movement to end decades of discrimination and segregation. "Do you sense people have lost a sense of what the prize is?" she asked.

It was an interesting question from someone who, while always engaged in good causes, has rarely explicitly aligned herself with antiracism movements or social programs that target racism. It was also a legitimate question, though one that didn't get an adequate answer. The prize is a society in which racism no longer exists and all people, regardless of ethnic background or identity, can advance as far as their abilities and resolve will take them and in any direction they choose.

Nothing stays still for long in America. Even so, race has been a constant source of conflict. From the seventeenth century till the thirteenth amendment of 1865, racism rationalized, complemented and, to use Patrick Wolfe's phrase, provided "an alibi" for slavery. Legal segregation, civil rights protests and black power resistance followed, but without obliterating race from the American cultural landscape. A glance at history can mislead us into assuming that race

is a permanent, unmovable feature. But, if race is an invention rather than a force of nature – and I will argue that it is – then the dividing lines between the so-called races are changeable. They are, as Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean put it, “not fixed but continue to change through expression and validation” (p. 224).

Purposive efforts to eradicate race through affirmative action, equal opportunity and other policy initiatives lessened the negative impact of race from the late 1960s. But the torment continued and the racial order remained. The order is much like a wedding cake; a tiered construction on which white icing sits on top and covers everything else.

The supposition that the traditional racial hierarchy could be eased out of existence instead of destroyed was raised memorably in E. Franklin Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie*, first published in 1955 (as *Bourgeoisie Noire*). Franklin Frazier discerned aspirational black people, not prone to spending energy on fighting racism, but by pursuing individual ambitions.

More recently in 2010, Timothy B. Neary has reflected: “Still crowded in segregated urban ghettos and denied the vote in recalcitrant southern cities, postwar African Americans, nevertheless began to identify themselves as ‘consumer citizens’” (p. 120).

Terrene expectations gave way to other aspirations, according to Neary: “The extensive range of modern media exposed them [African Americans] to a world of middle-class material abundance, a dream for sale that appeared within reach” (p. 120).

The research of Clint Wilson and Félix Gutiérrez into the portrayal of ethnic groups by the media complemented this: in 1985, they examined the market’s response to aspirational blacks: “Advertisers promote consumption of their products as a shortcut to the good life, a quick fix for low-income consumers” (p. 128).

The particular conception of the “good life” they have in mind is imagined as a cornucopia of material goods. “You may not be able to live in the best neighborhoods, wear the best clothes, or have the best job, but you can drink the same liquor, smoke the same cigarettes, and drive the same car as those who do,” is how Wilson and Gutiérrez summarized the advertisers’ message to black consumers.

Wilson and Gutiérrez’s analysis is sober in its conclusions. While advertisers were wooing African Americans into consumer culture, “a system of inequality that keeps them below national norms in education, housing, income, health and other indicators” remained (p. 130).

Celebrity culture has perpetrated a falsehood, according to Christopher E. Bell; what he calls “an ideological fallacy” (p. 49). The cultural democracy supposedly introduced by celebrity culture is now a constituent part of a more equal society in which class has receded in importance. The impression that the racial hierarchy has disappeared is also fallacious and, in this book, I’ll provide evidence to support this. But let me stay with Bell’s observation, which prompts

a further question: discomfort with persistent inequalities is arguably less than it was ten years ago. Why?

More than two decades after Wilson and Gutiérrez's reminder, there were many successful African Americans who enjoyed opulent lifestyles, elevated status and the kind of wealth that would have been unimaginable for most of the 1980s. And many, many more prepared to enter into a bargain that was less *Faust*, more *The Price Is Right*.

Pause for a moment to think of Beyoncé. All celebrities exhibit themselves in a way that makes them resemble merchandise – articles of trade that can be bought and sold in the marketplace. Yet, even in this company, Beyoncé is a rare bird. Since 2003, when she split from Destiny's Child, she has surpassed even Michael Jordan as a sales phenomenon. She's turned herself into a one-woman "Entertainment Empire," as Lacey Rose calls it, selling, among many other things, movie tickets, DVDs, CDs, tvs, ringtones, cosmetics and colognes (but not video games – more of which shortly).

According to *Forbes.com* Beyoncé makes \$21 million per year from album sales alone. Gail Mitchell, of *Billboard*, reports that Beyoncé, as solo artist and with Destiny's Child, has sold over 100 million units, including albums, physical and digital singles and music DVDs. Writing and sometimes producing her own music offers another income stream amounting to \$8 million per year.

With her mother, Beyoncé has launched two designer labels, House of Deréon, which specializes in upmarket clothes, and Deréon, which includes handbags, sportswear and jewelry. The two lines bring in \$15 million per year.

Beyoncé is in a class of her own when it comes to endorsements: her portfolio is worth \$20 million per year. Is there another celebrity in history to have lent his or her name to so many products? Armani, Pepsi, L'Oreal, and Hilfiger are among the global brands that have paid Beyoncé to link her name to their products. They all believe that featuring Beyoncé's name or perhaps just her image will help them sell products. The exact value of Beyoncé's name+image is practically impossible to calculate, although when she pulled out of a deal with Gate Five, a video company that was about to launch a game called *Starpower: Beyoncé* (in which players could perform with Beyoncé), the company sued for £100 million in lost sales.

Some measure of the businesslike ruthlessness with which Beyoncé rules her empire can be taken from her decision to fire her father Mathew as manager in 2011. He had guided her career since 1995, when Destiny's Child was formed.

While Beyoncé is currently the *ne plus ultra*, all celebrities are engaged in selling commodities. They also embody exchange values. By this I mean, they are living commodities themselves: their very presence, whether at a première or at the gym, has value, if for no other reason than we consumers are interested enough to pay for it (how many celebrity magazines feature pictures of stars driving, shopping or just doing nothing in particular?). They are also human signposts for what Wilson and Gutiérrez called "a short cut to the good life".

They allude to the prospect of a culture of extravagant consumption where an endless cycle of voracious desire maintains the demand for commodities. Where shopping is close to being the most fundamental human experience.

The consumer culture in which celebrities command attention, occasionally, adulation, and, routinely, emulation is predicated on the principle that anything – *anything* – is tradeable. In other words, it can be bought and sold in a market. Could this include the end of racism? More specifically, an end to manifold effects of racism on any consumer with means enough to buy what the likes of Beyoncé, Oprah and others glamorize and commend.

Celebrities have a lot to answer for. They are been blamed for corroding our sensibilities, for inciting people to strive for fame at any cost, and for turning heads towards meretricious commodities, things that have no relevance or any consequence of lasting importance on our lives. They're also accused of distracting us in a way that diverts our attention, energies and ambition away from attainable goals and toward fanciful dreams.

This book is about the effects of celebrities, but the effects of black celebrities in particular. "Blacks enter the mainstream wearing different masks," detects Shelby Steele in a 2008 interview with Ibram Rogers (p. 16). One of those masks is that of the "bargainer," whose sales pitch is, says Steele, "I will not rub the history of racism in your face if you will not hold my race against me." Then there is the "challenger," who presumes all whites are racists until they prove otherwise and so makes whites feel uncomfortable, embarrassed and guilty.

Today's generation of African Americans is not as ingratiating as bargainers, but they're certainly not challengers either. Historically, challengers have been either canonized as seers and freedom fighters, or, more usually, consigned to oblivion. If there is a bargain on offer, it's a different one from that imagined by Steele and is probably something like: "You're not going to hold anything against me because, by applauding me and acknowledging my talents, you are showing how you and, indeed, the whole of America has moved beyond race and put all the bigotry, hatred and segregation that has disfigured the nation behind us. So I might make the occasional jibe against whites and I might even venture toward social criticism every so often. But that's what you expect from a black person, right? In return, I promise not to demand anything radical and I'll direct whatever criticism I have at black people themselves more than anybody else."

However inadvertently, black celebrities have brokered a deal that pacifies Middle America and distracts at least a portion of the black population from the quest for what was once called "the prize." That prize has been replaced by commodities, products that have been vested with value far beyond their actual worth. Think about hip-hop, a culture that became an industry.

In the 1980s, fables of the hopelessness, wretchedness and defeatism that filled the ghettos were carried by DJs and MCs. Helpless but unafraid, woebegone but resourceful, often funny, usually inventive, and always sharply aware of social affairs, hip-hop artists pioneered a fresh genre. Today's hip-hop has traded the commentaries for commodities: artists with no aspiration greater than getting rich are either corporate spokesmen (occasionally, women) or, in a few cases, corporate heads. The most creative act that rap accentuates is buying products that are often beyond the means of ordinary consumers. The word left ringing in the brain is "exploit," but in which sense? To make use of and derive benefit, or to use situations or people in an unfair and selfish way?

Isn't that what celebrity culture does, we might ask? More people encouraging us to part with our hard-earned money might seem the last thing we need. But we want them, all the same: we find them entertaining or, at least, agreeably distracting. And here is the *quid pro quo*: celebrities, in return, pressurize us to spend money. Not by twisting our arms up our backs, but by gentle, perhaps hidden persuasion. It's impossible to get through a waking day without confronting an image (usually several) of a well-known figure imploring consumers to buy a product or service. Even if they don't do it openly, their clothes, jewelry, cars, homes, favored drinks, preferred films, their very presence promotes things we can either buy or dream of buying.

On the other side of the bargain, there are consumers, paying customers prepared to spend money on the "shortcut to the good life," but with an expectation that something else will emerge from the trade. "Consumption is uniquely important for blacks in gaining social membership," conclude researchers Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár. "Consuming rebuts racism" (p. 41). There's a serpentine logic that winds back to the 1960s, when David Caplovitz's study of low-income African Americans and Puerto Ricans in New York revealed what the author called "compensatory consumption." I will uncoil this logic in the chapters to come; for the moment, let me just state that consumption has a particular significance for black people, as do the figures who promote consumption.

There are, to be sure, a multiplying number of black celebrities who are enjoying the fruits of success – and enjoying them publicly. Yet, as we will document in more detail as the book progresses, the majority of African Americans continue to underachieve in education and overachieve in graduating to prisons. Most remain at the opposite end of the social spectrum to Oprah and the others, and continue to face what Farah Jasmine Griffin, in her 2009 article "Children of Omar," calls "the instability, insecurity, and disruption that ... have been a persistent part of the black experience" (p. 657).