In this paper, the way African-Americans are visually represented in the United States media is analyzed using semiotic methods and anthropological theory. Images offered by commercial fashion and advertising design illustrate social contradictions between the consumer culture's representation of African-American economic success and the economic discrimination African-Americans experience.

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1) Stuart Hall, "The Politics of Representation," an unpublished lecture delivered at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, April 1987. In it he made some important observations about contemporary global media. First, he noted that images of marginalized peoples from around the world are slowly beginning to appear in media, moving from outside "the frame" of media representation to its margins, and even to its center. Second, while lauding this development, Hall said that despite seeing "more difference," which is a gain for ethnic groups struggling to be represented, "we constantly see ourselves represented in frames we don't want."

In analyzing images of African-Americans, every attempt was made to maintain a sense of contradiction within what Stuart Hall calls the "politics of representation." Articulated one way, the increasing number of African-Americans shown in advertising and other media is a political victory in the struggle for ethnic representation. An advertisement for an African-American hair care product, for example, portrays a successful two-parent family (Fig. 1). The semi-formal, business dress of the mother, the furniture, the large, framed art image on the wall, the basket of fruit, the stylized, no-curtain window blinds, and the father's golden neck chains all indicate a strong, affluent home and work life. This is the kind of positive portrayal of African-Americans that the media are beginning to present, and as such represents a gain in the politics of representation. But the copy, "Being Number One Is Up to You," is an appeal to individualism as the root of success and therefore contradicts the systemic nature of racial discrimination in United States society.

However, another reading is that advertising is a ritualistic representation of a historical classification: a people's ethnicity. The product's name, Stay-Sof-Fro, is an example of the African-American diacritic of dialect. Another diacritic, skin color, is activated by the use of African-American models. By connecting the ideology of consumerism with ethnicity, advertising becomes a discourse about ethnicity.

In advertising, art directing, photography, graphic design, and production are not simply esthetic activities. All advertisements work by filling their images with symbols that transfer their values to products. Martell, an expensive cognac, uses models in ultra-formal attire to position its product as a sign of quality, wealth, and classiness (Fig. 2). The black and gold of the liquor bottle and the pink wash reiterate that message. They become essential aspects of the politics of representation. In ethnic ads, symbolic diacritica—overt signals of identity—have such value. Historically, diacritica such as skin color, ethnic dress, dialects, hairstyles, cultural artifacts, etc. have served as recognizable signs for readers (Fig. 3). A 1935 ad in House Beautiful, for
example, used Caribbean diacritica—animals, weapons, clothing, fabric designs, island colors—to promote cruises. These diacritica may be imaginary, but in this ad they served as markers of ethnicity for people outside the group. Real diacritica serve as markers for people both inside and outside the group.

Such advertisements simultaneously present ethnic signs and the consumer culture's stratified system of social and symbolic boundaries. In this system, boundaries are signified by the display of products that are meant to be indices of success, wealth, prominence, social position, etc. The consumer culture's attempts to create, stimulate, and channel African-Americans' patterns of consumption and product display contradict the discriminatory practices that limit their access to the mechanisms for achieving material and symbolic success.

Contradictions in ethnic advertisements
The first order of contradictions in advertisements depicting African-Americans results from the way they are characterized. These characterizations are accomplished in three related ways. First, ethnic ads depict full participation in the dominant culture by presenting images denoting equality and success. The conspicuous display of consumer goods in advertisements signifies this participation. Second, images of African-Americans serve as metonyms, standing for the whole ethnic group. Third, members of the group actively participate in advertising production.

When African-Americans are shown enjoying the possession of an expensive consumer product, idealized appeals to success and ethnicity are created by juxtaposing symbols of status with ethnic models and diacritica. Displays of ownership carry connotations of opportunity, participation, and achievement in society, even though many ethnic group members do not have access to the educational opportunities and the lucrative occupations that permit ownership of expensive products. Advertisements tell minorities that they should believe and act upon the values of the dominant consumer culture when, in fact, many are discriminated against and their participation in that culture is thereby restricted.

Advertisements seldom depict the historical and social forces that can limit the life choices available for certain ethnic groups—for example, real differences in education, job opportunities, and access to political power. African-Americans, like everyone else, are represented as equal participants in the consumer culture.

This image of equality directly contradicts United States government statistics that indicate vast economic inequalities between white-Americans and African-Americans. For instance, in 1985 the median family income of all American families was

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$26,433; for whites it was $27,686; and for African-Americans it was $15,432. That same year, African-Americans comprised 11.1 percent of United States population, but 33.9 percent of the people who lived below the poverty level were black.3

Where ethnicity is depicted at the level of appearance, by using diacritica to signify it, the real historical and social structures that separate whites and African-Americans are disposed of. Advertisers usually dispense with African-American history altogether, but when it is called to mind, the meaningfulness of the group’s historical struggles are manipulated to heighten the value of something other than ethnicity. Advertisers make ethnic diacritica and history serve as guarantors of the ideology of consumerism, the idealized value of products, corporate images, and idealized ethnic boundaries. African-American history is ostensibly incorporated in some ads (Fig. 4). But is it really history? History is turned into an individualized account of a model who looks like a slave. Is it really necessary to turn to the past to discuss the political situation of African-Americans? The photo relies on the model’s wizened face to denote struggle while the background is a blur. The ad leaves out discrimination against African-Americans in today’s workplace. In contrast, documentary photos such as Dallas Kinney’s 1970 Pulitzer prize-winning photos show current degrading conditions of African-American farm workers.

Another ad in this series uses and idealizes history by putting it between the lines and giving an account of Coors’ new policy of reaching out to the African-American community (Fig. 5). The copy below the Coors logo, “Outstanding talent must be free to stand out,” is a double coding of African-American political struggles. It is meant to refer to the quality of Coors beer as well as to the struggle against discrimination. Again, the photo must be viewed as a positive representation of the success of a real member of the African-American community. Coors’ new “corporate citizenship” policy represents positive gains in the battle against economic discrimination. Read as a public apology for past corporate discrimination, the ad serves as a marker of the breakdown of ethnic boundaries.

The significance of this interpretation is underscored when we consider that the ethnic discourse in advertisements is often a story about an individual achieving success. The reader is asked to make a connection between copy like “number one gin,” “exquisitely dry,” and “satiny smooth” and a photo of an exquisitely dressed and adorned couple (Fig. 6). As in general advertising, women are placed in conventionalized poses that subordinate their gender to the male.

However, the image of a minority member—a carefully chosen
symbolic diacritic—is a common rhetorical form: it serves a metonymic function. Diacritica are used to address all members of the ethnic community who recognize the diacritica. The image of success must contradict the realities of most African-American lives.

Ethnic advertising offers many vignettes that describe success: formulas to achieve it, ways to feel about it, and how products should be used to represent it. This discourse intersects the diversity of African-Americans’ real relationships to success, as both underprivileged and successful members of society. In this hermeneutic process, the paradoxical web of ideology is entered; to desire advertised products is to ignore or naturalize oppressive social structures through which they are produced and distributed. The success stories portrayed in many ads tell readers a tale with familiar liberal overtones: success is achieved by an individual’s hard work, sacrifice, and education. Of course these ingredients are essential, but in a society with racial discrimination they do not assure equal opportunity or personal prosperity.

Still, these images of prosperity cannot be dismissed as completely imaginary or false because they do indicate the success that some members of the ethnic community have always enjoyed and that others struggled to achieve. In the marketing process, advertising is targeted toward consumers, not the poor. The images analyzed here appeared in consumer magazines that are aimed at financially secure African-Americans. Thus, these images indicate ethnic gains in real politics and media representation.

Advertising agencies, minority owned or otherwise, are critical players in the drive to reach consumers. Agencies create design strategies and supply models and technical production knowledge for appeals via symbolic diacritica. African-American participation in advertising production heightens the ethnic appeal. These models are the primary vehicle through which the ethnic advertisement’s meaning is created and transmitted (because skin color is a most obvious diacritic). These models address the reader’s subjectivity in a familiar voice.

African-American participation in advertising production engenders the contradictions inherent in crossing boundaries. Ethnic models idealize boundaries of segregation and discrimination that still exist in American society. What the model gives to the advertising image is ethnic difference; what is returned is an image of society where ethnicity does not make a difference. Still, a model’s success represents progress for African-Americans. Those who succeed in the advertising business, like those who achieve in other social realms, can serve as role models for minority youth. The lack of difference in the
way whites and African-Americans are presented may also help to break down stereotypes and boundaries and help to end discrimination. In other words, advertising messages cannot be separated from the process of defining culture.

However, the design of ethnic advertisements cannot be divorced from advertising’s function as an industrial communication code. All the signs in ads are meant to give meaning to products. In the “success advertisement,” expensive clothes, colors, jewelry, food, and cars make beautiful models and advertised products look prosperous. The meaning of these signs is always circular. In a car ad, a model wears an expensive watch; in a watch ad, a model drives an expensive car. The props and the advertised products exchange symbolic functions throughout the system of advertising: once the giver of significance, now the receiver. In the end the reader is not sure if ads say, “you use this product because you are successful” or “you are successful because you use this product.” The perfect ad turns a product into an index of good fortune. Thus, advertising’s portrayal of African-American success reflects cultural progress, but their success is always framed to enhance, even signify, products (Fig. 7).

![Reflections of You](image)

**Political contradictions**

A second level of contradictions is revealed by considering the effect of media’s redeployment of the signs of ethnicity upon ethnic political activity. As previously discussed, in advertising, ethnic signifiers lose their exclusive status as boundary markers for groups whose members share cultural or political differences.

In an increasingly global phenomenon, the consumer culture, through the semiotics of advertising design and product display, confronts and attempts to transform social and cultural values
into the ideology and behavior of consumption. When the dominant ideology of consumerism is so pervasive that it defines the fulfillment of all human needs and desires in terms of consumption, it is difficult for anyone—let alone marginalized peoples—to define their needs and desires along lines of difference.

African-Americans, as members of American society, have the right to share its symbolic and material wealth. However, they must also have the right to define the forms that wealth takes. Ironically, to share and participate in the consumer culture may mean that ethnic groups lose some of their ability to define their own cultures. To succeed in the consumer culture means accepting at least some of its signs, values, forms, desires, ways of being and imagining, and so on. The consumer ideology penetrates and weakens alternative and potential cultural values by transforming the significance of their diacritica into visual styles. In the process, consumerism naturalizes its own values, beliefs, and behaviors. For example, the dread-lock hairstyle, a diacritic that has religious and political significance for Rastifarians, can be emptied of its cultural context and turned into a fashion statement (Fig. 8). The use of this diacritic is ironic in that Rastafarian music, dress, and belief are part of a Jamaican culture that is in opposition to the existing capitalist power structure.

To some extent, ethnic values and political interests must conflict with the politics of the consumer culture. The institutions in American society that create and reproduce consumer culture are the same institutions that discriminate against African-Americans. The dominant consumer culture is stratified through unequal access to products in order to maintain differences in status between groups. For most African-Americans, this difference is maintained through racial discrimination.
However, to comprehend fully the complexities of the confrontation between the ethnic and consumer cultures, racial discrimination must be placed into a historical relation with ethnicity and ethnic political activity. Ethnicity and political activity must be theorized as determined by, and autonomous from, discrimination—that is, as semi-autonomous. This is because African-American ethnicity is simultaneously the site of discrimination and the site around which political activity against discrimination is organized.

The determinate aspect of this relationship recognizes that African-American ethnicity, as a social, economic, and historical category, is dependent on discrimination. In the determinate model, to lessen discrimination means to lessen emphasis on ethnicity and the political activity that it engenders. The autonomous model argues that once ethnicity has been historically fashioned it operates as a determining cultural sphere in its own right. That is, if discrimination were to disappear tomorrow, ethnicity would continue to be a sphere of social difference and political activity. Semi-autonomy notes the possibility of eliminating discrimination and maintaining some ethnic differences while recognizing the difficulties of politicizing these differences in consumer culture. In the Civil Rights Movement era of affirmative action, some African-Americans achieved economic gains. By eliminating the discrimination that is its material root, the significance of ethnicity must change. Because no one argues that discrimination should be maintained in order to preserve ethnicity, the question of eliminating discrimination revolves around its effect on the significance of ethnicity. At the extremes, African-American success can eliminate ethnic differences through integration, or maintain and enhance them in separate but equal cultures. In complete integration, the politics of ethnicity are lost as ethnicity disappears. In order to build political activism to fight against discrimination, a sense of ethnicity must be protected, maintained, and developed.

In the advertising image, African-American culture integrates into consumer culture. Advertising's model of success suggests that the consumer culture presents a world without ethnic difference but one that is stratified by access to consumer products on the basis of individual merit. For the individual who can succeed according to its dictates, the pull to integrate into such a world is strong. The message is all-pervasive in American society. Some African-Americans pursue policies that lead to integration into the existing system. These leaders argue that this is the most pragmatic strategy to overcome discrimination.

Other African-American leaders espouse a separate-but-equal
definition of ethnicity. In maintaining a strong sense of ethnic identity, these leaders believe that ethnic political activity can be generated and channelled for the greatest gain for the whole ethnic community. For these leaders, integration cannot lead to the end of discrimination because the system is inherently discriminatory. Integration will be for those who make it in that system. If ethnicity is not signified as an arena for political activity, those who succeed may fade into the existing class structure of the consumer culture, resulting in a black elite and a permanent black underclass. Successful individuals can even be cited as examples of how well the system works. Advertising discourse about individual prosperity implies accepting capitalism's stratified character and integrating into it rather than recognizing and challenging its relationship to discrimination.

The critical problem is the way success is defined within the politics of ethnicity. While there are positive features to advertising’s representations, it cannot be forgotten that in most media, the dominant culture defines the framework of representation. One important aspect of any modern political struggle is the ability to control the politics of media representation. For the politics of ethnicity, a critical political and ideological factor is the media’s power to represent ethnic boundaries. Ethnic minority groups do not control the mainstream mass media, so they do not control how ethnicity is represented. Even media that are controlled by minorities, like *Ebony* and *Ebony Man*, are subject to the economic and ideological orientation of the marketplace. Attracting major advertising accounts is essential to their survival. So while the editorial pages of *Ebony* are filled with awareness of the history of African-Americans and personal accounts of struggles against racism and discrimination, its advertising images create contradictions that soften racial conflicts with images of economic success (Fig. 9).

**Concluding remarks**

Advertisements subject readers to idealized images of their ethnicity. They embody the contradictions between the rewards promised by the consumer ideology and the facts of everyday life as lived within ethnic and socioeconomic boundaries. African-American leaders who utilize ethnicity as a site for meaningful political, social, religious, and other cultural activities must recognize and challenge the consumer culture’s representations of ethnicity, social conflict, and personal values and goals by formulating their own definitions and representations. Politically, it is not enough for African-American models and other ethnic signs to appear in the media frame. Controlling the way those signs are framed is the essence of the politics of representation.
Future research

The kind of textual analysis done in this paper gives partial insight into the mechanisms of the consumer culture’s ideology. By focusing attention on the ways ethnic advertisements are designed, one approach to the investigation of the problem of ethnicity and ideology is framed.

Other issues and other methodological approaches to the subject need to be explored. Empirical methods like content analysis could better investigate and describe the lexicon of copy and images that are used in ethnic advertisements and locate changes in this lexicon over time, linking them to political and ethnic change. Ethnographic methods, which involve reading and discussing advertisements with diverse communities, as well as observing their use of products, could provide insights into readers’ interpretations of these messages.

Some questions for future research might include: How do African-American readers deal with the contradictions in advertisements? Do different groups—e.g., religious groups or classes of African-Americans—see and react to them differently? How do other ethnic groups read these advertisements? What role do consumer products play in boundary formation? How do those involved in the production of these advertisements interpret them? Specifically, do ethnic advertising agencies produce more positive ethnic images? Are consumer values commensurate with the political values necessary to bring African-Americans and other ethnic minorities to a position of social equality? Are consumer values the values that ethnic groups consciously wish their members to internalize? Do idealized boundaries lead to heightened expectations that in turn lead to a lack of fulfillment and frustration among members of the ethnic groups? To what extent is the communications strategy of idealizing boundaries used in advertisements aimed at other ethnic minorities? What role does the consumer ideology play in the design of advertising that is aimed at other countries and cultures? Do ethnic boundaries change as a result of the promotion of the consumer ideology or do advertising’s idealizations simply mask social contradictions?

6) A Native American colleague once remarked about Native Americans’ historical and social circumstance, “We cannot practice our religion because we cannot practice our political economy.”