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Don't Smile for the Camera: Black Power, Para-Proxemics and Prolepsis in Print Ads for Hip-Hop Clothing

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While much has been written on marketing to children, there remains a curious gap in the literature concerning marketing *through* children. This study considers print ads for three brands of hip-hop clothing for children (Rocawear, Sean John, and Baby Phat) that appeared in *Cookie*, a parenting magazine aimed at adults. I argue that, by depicting children in a "cool pose" of "flat affect," these ads violate social expectations and assert "Black Power" through a para-proxemic challenge to the viewer. The result is a prolepsis — or foretaste of the future — which rhymes the child models with their adult equivalents.

Childhood: A Moving Target

For years, academics and cultural critics have bemoaned the commercialization of childhood (Elkind, 1981; Linn, 2004; Postman, 1982; Schor, 2004, Winn, 1977). As evidence of this trend, they have often pointed to how advertising prematurely pushes children into adulthood. Others have countered that such "media panics" are steeped in a naïve form of nostalgia that glorifies a mythical pre-market past, a "golden age" of childhood purity and innocence (Buckingham, 2000; Kinder, 1999). Some even challenge the Romantic notion of childhood as separate and distinct from adulthood, arguing that these "life stages" were a Victorian invention and thus a fairly recent development in the course of human history (Aries, 1962; Heins, 2001, Jenkins, 1998). James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) concur, arguing that childhood is a cultural construction that "cannot be 'read off' from the biological differences between adults and children such as physical size or sexual maturity" (p. 146). Thus, as marketers race to the bottom in search of "cradle-to-grave" brand loyalty, some may protest the exploitation of young children

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while others celebrate the liberation of young consumers, but all tacitly acknowledge that childhood continues to occupy a precarious position in contemporary Western culture.

Many argue that the confusion and controversy surrounding childhood stems from the culture's dependence on a false dichotomy: adults are sexual, kids aren't (Blaine, 1999; Foucault, 1988; Kincaid, 1998, Levine, 2002). According to Holland (2004), such myths are to be expected. She contends that representations of childhood tend to be crafted by adults and therefore reflect the projected fantasies of how adults believe they once were and how they think children should be now (p. xi). In this way, despite any empirical evidence to the contrary, the idea of childhood and adulthood as mutually exclusive continues to dominate with sexuality serving as the defining difference — the proverbial line in the sand (p. 47). But such boundaries can serve a dual purpose. Cross (2004) and Higonnet (1998) describe how the binary oppositions of this romantic ideal set the scene for the accelerated circulation of advertisements depicting a "knowing child" whose self-awareness — and implicit sexuality — gets attention by challenging long-established taboos (p. 207). For Holland (1986), such images stand out from the crowd by following a carefully executed formula: "To achieve that pleasurable shock they must contrive to maintain the category [of childhood] while drawing attention to its fragility" (p. 53). Indeed, marketers must tread lightly: if they blur the line between adult and child, innocent and knowing, they must stop short of erasing it altogether lest a cute depiction be misconstrued as inappropriate.

The study below seeks to better understand a particular mobilization of childhood in the service of promoting three brands of hip-hop clothing: Sean John, Rocawear, and Baby Phat. In this semiotic textual analysis, I argue that the child models in these ads are often posed in very adult-like ways. First, many of the children look directly into the camera at eye level, setting up what Meyrowitz (1986) refers to as a "para-proxemic" relationship of equality with the presumed adult viewer. Second, many of the ads combine direct address with a serious facial expression. Drawing on the work of Goffman (1959; 1979) and others, I contend that the absence of a smile is not a neutral expression. On the contrary, since a smile is often read as a display of appeasement and submission, its absence can create a strong impression of dominance and authority (Hall, 1998; Hess, et al., 2002; LaFrance & Hecht, 2000). Therefore, when a child, generally understood to be relatively weak and dependent, sports a look that is both direct and serious, the result is a prolepsis, or flash-forward in time. In this way, not smiling for the camera imbues the child model with the power and sophistication of an adult. Before moving on to consider the signification of the smile — and its lack thereof — I should note that I am not attempting to formulate an argument here about the media effects of marketing *to* children. Rather, my task is to draw attention to how print ads that market *through* children might interact with the referent systems of their primary target — parents.

A Brief History of the Smile

Trumble (2004) reminds us that contemporary photography's signature expression of the broad, toothy grin only became de rigueur through a gradual confluence of technological and cultural change. In the late 19th century, family photographs were a tedious affair. Subjects traveled to a professional studio and were forced to stay perfectly still for extended periods of time in order to accommodate the slow

shutter speeds of early cameras — a process not unlike sitting for a painted portrait.[2] As a result, expressions were often dour. Schroeder (1998) adds that even more informal settings also "yielded solemn, uneasy or scowling visages" while "faces in high school and college yearbooks were downright presidential in mien" (p. 131). He argues that this somber tendency was not determined solely by the rudimentary technology of the day, but also by the well-established visual tropes of fine art and popular illustration:

> Smiles, especially tooth-exposing smiles, are class-related. The smiling subjects are variously not in control of their expressions; they are innocents like children and peasants; madmen, seniles, drunks, outcasts, people lost in passions of lust, greed, power, chicanery, cruelty; and at the fundament, they are barely human. (p. 110)

Berger (1977) notes a similar theme in 17th century oil painting:

> The painted poor smile as they offer what they have for sale. (They smile showing their teeth, which the rich in pictures never do.) They smile at the better-off — to ingratiate themselves, but also at the prospect of a sale or a job. (p. 104)

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that "among the nobility and the sophisticated, smiling was frowned upon at least in portraiture" (Schroeder, 1998, p. 116). But by the 1920s and onward, inexpensive portable cameras (and faster exposure times) enabled the masses to catch more jovial expressions on film, a practice vigorously promoted by the Kodak camera company (Kotchemidova, 2005). Concurrently, advancements in dentistry along with the beaming smiles of silver screen idols such as Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks helped to glamorize the grin and loosen the lips of their fans (Shroeder, 1998). In this way, slowly but surely, the connotation of the smile in American culture began to shift. As evidence of this trend, Hess et al. (2002) cite a study that found no full smiles in yearbook photos before 1920, but, by 1970, estimated that "60% of the men and 80% of the women showed a partial or complete smile" (p. 189). Today, as Kotchemidova (2005) wryly observes, the Kodak formula lives on: "No matter how bored we are at a social gathering, we always smile for the picture" (p. 21).

Impression Management

Why does facial expression matter? Goffman (1959) argues that the transfer of complex meanings often occurs through a process of "impression management" whereby we perform the role of an idealized self which foregrounds certain qualities and conceals others. Conversely, we read others through a set of similar cues — a sort of visual short-hand based on past experiences — in order to infer expectations about their future behavior. Thus, the actors in this drama typically interpret scripts already known to their audience and the resulting "impressions" tell a familiar story, set the scene, and establish the terms of engagement. According to Goffman, these performances only work when people behave in a "manner" that is appropriate to both their "setting" and "appearance." If not, the resulting faux pas will

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[2] Early cameras had to keep the shutter open for long intervals in order to expose the film to sufficient light. If the subject moved, they risked blurring the image.

expose the actor as an imposter. For instance, a pauper may pass among the court of the castle (setting) by wearing the imperial robes of a prince (appearance), but his crude vocabulary and lack of decorum (manner) will soon give him away. Thus, manner is key. In print advertisements, however, both the setting and appearance of the models are highly controlled and our view of their manner is limited to a mere instant of display. Thus, like mannequins in a store, the models can be carefully manipulated, so as to be perpetually frozen with the ideal posture, gesture, and facial expression. This is to say that while a picture may be worth a thousand words, it also communicates by *concealing* information. Or, as Goffman puts it, "if the audience is to see only a brief performance, then the likelihood of an embarrassing occurrence will be relatively small, and it will be relatively safe for the performer, especially in anonymous circumstances, to maintain a front that is rather false" (p. 221).

Goffman's dramaturgical approach to sociology corresponds with the general consensus in psychology which holds that facial expression, though an innate and universal product of our evolution, is nonetheless subject to display rules governed by dominate social norms (Ekman, 1982; Oatley et al., 2006). For example, while smiles have been found to be a remarkably consistent expression of happiness across cultures, they can also be used to hide negative feelings (Abel, 2002; Matsumo & Yoo, 2007; Oatley et al., 2006). Thus, since a real, felt emotion does not always correspond to the displayed facial expression, it follows that the traditional/obligatory smile for the camera is, in essence, a performance of emotion. The face validity of this assertion is overwhelming; who among us has not "put on a happy face" for the sake of a photograph? I contend that this act of abstracting an expression from its felt emotion in order to "play by the rules" and display the proper front is a form of what Goffman (1979) has called "hyper-ritualization" (p. 84). The invitation to "say cheese" is our cue to strike a stylized pose. Such forced smiles may not be exactly false; we may, in fact, be feeling quite jolly. My point here is that, regardless of our internal emotional state, the photographic ritual — providing that it is not too terribly candid — affords us the opportunity to externally exaggerate the internal mood we wish to convey to others. And when it comes to impression management, the stakes couldn't be higher; social interaction is like dust in the wind while the stylized pose captured by a photo becomes part of our permanent record.

Thus far, we have considered how, over the course of the last century, the smile has become the conventional facial expression for portrait photography. Perhaps this is to be expected: it is, after all, a nearly universal sign of happiness. But researchers tell of another side to the smile. For Goffman (1979), the expression may denote a positive mood while, at the same time, connoting a submissive disposition:

> Smiles, it can be argued, often function as ritualistic mollifiers, signaling that nothing agonistic is intended or invited, that the meaning of the other's act has been understood and found acceptable, that, indeed, the other is approved and appreciated ... smiles, then, seem more the offering of an inferior than a superior. In any case, it appears that in cross-sex encounters in American society, women smile more, and more expansively, than men. (p. 48)

Goffman's hypothesis is supported by extensive research in experimental psychology showing how smiling often communicates deference to authority and is expressed more often by women than men (Deutsch, 1990; Hecht & LaFrance, 1998; LaFrance & Hecht, 2000). After considering two meta-analytic literature

reviews, Hall (1998) concurs and suggests that such behavior is "tertiary" and therefore more likely to be learned through socialization rather than hardwired at birth (p. 171). To wit, the smiling frequency of babies does not vary according to gender (Hess et al., 2002). Even so, adults are more likely to perceive smiling babies as female (ibid). In their earlier, more qualitative work, both Cline and Spender (1987) and Hochschild (2003) also found that, while men rarely smile, a cheery demeanor is all but mandatory for women — especially in the workplace. Thus, it would appear that the smile, as a symbol of deference, is a highly gendered act: "women are expected to be less dominant and smile more, while men are expected to be more dominant and to frown more" (Oatley et al., 2006, p. 247). Since the smile is so tightly intertwined with cultural notions of femininity and passivity, what are we to make of female models who look back into the camera with a serious look? What if, instead of smiling, she were to cast her steely gaze directly into the camera and confront her hailed viewer with a vacant look, utterly devoid of hospitality? What if she "looked" like a man?

Indecent Expressions

If we allow that images invoke the symbolic conventions of lived social interaction (Meyrowitz, 1986), then an ad featuring a female model wearing a smile would likely convey a friendly, passive, non-threatening, and suitably feminine attitude. Conversely, when women do not smile for the camera, the result is an arresting image — one that violates social expectations. I would like to suggest that the removal of a conciliatory gesture such as the smile does not create a blank or neutral impression but rather an unmitigated stare which—in the context of social interaction—is not only rude, but a brazen provocation. For example, supermodel Kristen McMenamy, whose "icy, hard-edged, eyebrowless gaze" made her one of the "reigning stare-masters" of haute couture fashion, has said that, when strutting down the runway, she looks out at the audience and thinks, "Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you" (Jacobs, 1993, pp. 199-200). For Harris (1993), such a confrontational look has become standard in women's fashion magazines and comes from "models so confident of their own mystique that they seem to despise what the reader herself values highly, the so called 'male gaze'" (p. 132). "Fuck you" indeed.

Just as the haute couture stare allows women to defy the obligatory smile of both their subordinate gender role and the prevalent conventions of portrait photography, the "cool pose" of flat affect provides another historically oppressed group — Black men — with a creative coping strategy in the face of intense material deprivation and structural inequalities. According to Majors and Billson (1992), the "cool pose" is both an attitude and a gesture, "an emotionless, fearless, and aloof front" deployed by poor Black men living in the inner-city (p. 8). Their faces may appear to be devoid of expression, but the authors argue that the "cool pose" is, in fact, a sensational performance shot through with meaning — a mask meant to conceal vulnerability and shame while projecting an outward attitude of pride, confidence, and dignity. In short, it is a look of hyper-masculinity: tough, strong, and stoic. Thus, the "cool pose" is a form of impression management that offers compensation for the humiliation of social and economic disenfranchisement. But, in recent years, this display has also become the signature gesture of hip-hop music, a visual manifestation of the verbal braggadocio, bluster and hubris of many a "gangsta rap" lyric. This newfound caché has brought the symbolic defiance of the "cool pose" out of the projects and into the heart of mainstream American consumer culture.

Brand Bloodlines

In the analysis that follows, I contend that the relationship between advertisements for the adult and children's lines of the same brand can be both intimate and expansive. This is to say that, as we draw meaning from a single ad, we crawl through the looking glass and out into the wider universe of the brand as a whole. For example, we are not only regarding an ad for Rocawear Kids, but also relating it to any other images we may have seen promoting Rocawear for adults. Thus, the decoding process extends well beyond the formal limits of any given ad and into what Williamson (1978) has called the "referent system" of images already existing in our heads. In this way, symbolic family ties can be mutually reinforced through visual tropes of resemblance that rhyme a consistent brand identity across child and adult advertising campaigns. By "rhyme," I mean the way in which one image recalls another through deep formal similarities. In other words, the children's ad is less an exact replica of the adult ad and more like the second line in a couplet, providing just enough variation to be clever, while staying well within the proper phonetic constraints.

I approached the ads using semiotic textual analysis (Saussure, 1966), a method which seeks to dissect signs into their component parts: the signifier (a symbol that "stands in" for the object) and the signified (the mental concept of the object). For example, we might consider how a picture of a child (the signifier) can denote the literal, or face value, meaning (a small, young person) and yet simultaneously connote a whole set of signifieds, or extended symbolic meanings (purity, vulnerability, the past, the future, etc.). Of course, semiotics privileges certain questions at the expense of others. As Slater (1997) points out, it is a method more concerned with calculating the formula of how — rather than why — meaning is formed (p. 141). This is to say that semiotics can overemphasize how the structure of the text and the dominion of codes collude to determine our interpretations of an ad. Left unchecked, such assumptions can tempt analysts to ignore actual social practices which may very well produce associations between images and ideas that are anything but arbitrary.[3] Moreover, there's a difference between pursuing a careful, systematic approach and hiding behind the patina of scientific objectivity. At the end of the day, what follows is my own interpretation of these texts, albeit informed by theory and a constellation of codes currently circulating in the culture. That being said, since print advertisements often deploy images in order to bind together products and ideas, semiotics provides a handy analytical crowbar with which we might attempt to pry them apart, reinstate the missing quotation marks, and cite sources. So, before deconstructing advertisements of hip-hop clothing for children, let us consider the lineage of their parent companies: Sean John, Rocawear, and Phat Farm.

Many authors contend that Black consumer culture continues to be marked by the deprivations of slavery, adaptation under Jim Crow, and the daily humiliations of the post-Civil Rights era such that the freedom to own rather than be owned remains deeply charged with political implications (Austin, 1993; Chin 2001; White & White, 1999). Smith (2004) makes a similar argument in describing W.E.B. Du Bois' award-winning series of photographs at the 1900 Paris Exposition. The "American Negro Exhibit" featured portraits of young, middle class Blacks — images that, Smith argues, sought to promote the success of the "talented tenth" and severe popular associations between their race and both the material conditions

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[3] I am currently working on an audience study based on mothers' responses to children's clothing ads.

and underlying assumptions of slavery. Thus, in this context, we might consider the conspicuous consumption of designer clothing as not merely an ostentatious assertion of newfound wealth, but also a public declaration of humanity. Moreover, the "cool pose" of hip-hop fashion has been described as both a vital form of creative expression and a subversive protest against a racist society (Barnard, 2002; Majors & Billson, 1992; Wilbekin, 1999). Perry (2004) even goes so far as to suggest that "style, particularly that acquired at great expense, has always made for an in-your-face challenge to the powers that be" (p. 196). No wonder, then, that advertisements for designer hip-hop brands like Sean John and Rocawear would reference the raised fist of the "Black Power" movement (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Diddy and Tommie Smith
Left: Sean John ad (Bebo Website, May 10, 2006)
Right: 1968 Olympics Ceremony (Zirin, 2003)

With his bowed head and blue-and-white track suit, Sean John "Diddy" Combs (owner and founder of Sean John) recalls Tommie Smith who, along with his teammate John Carlos, staged a symbolic protest against racism during a medal award ceremony at the 1968 Olympics (Figure 1). This brazen act so offended the International Olympic Committee that they stripped the athletes of their medals and

banned them for life (Zirin, 2003). Supermodel Naomi Campbell, posing for Rocawear, sits on a wicker throne and sports an afro — a look which evokes the widely circulated publicity shot of Huey Newton (Figure 2), one of the founders of the Black Panther Party (Cleaver, 2001). No smiles here, only the quiet defiance of flat affect — made even more striking when expressed by a woman. Thus, in both the Sean John and the Rocawear ads, the "cool pose" of the model conflates the political will of the original referent with the newfound freedom to be fashionable.

Figure 2: Naomi Campbell and Huey Newton
Left: Rocawear ad (BW Greyscale Website, December 4, 2006)
Right: Black Panthers publicity photo (Public Domain)

But, lest we get carried away, Smith (2003) adds an important caveat, noting that hip-hop moguls like "Diddy" engage in a highly contradictory form of symbolic "activism." While inviting "his more downtrodden constituents to 'buy in' to the emerging paradigm of accessible luxury and social status," the hip-hop mogul "as a visual signifier for the 'good life'" represents a "socially competitive" path to racial uplift in stark contrast to the "support-led communal development blueprints from the civil rights era" (p. 71). In the hustle to get ahead, it's every man for himself:

> The mogul may lament the plight of the Black masses, and he may simulate reference to these constituencies in the name of performative "authenticity," but he doesn't sacrifice his own quest for the American good life on their behalf. Rather, the mogul's vision of gilded glory is as competitive and exclusive as it is opulent …. Thus, for all of his upwardly mobile pretensions, the hip-hop mogul needs the spectacle of the more impoverished masses for they give him the raw material, the literal human canvas, for which, and upon which, his ascent can be made emblematic. (pp. 82, 85)

3 A
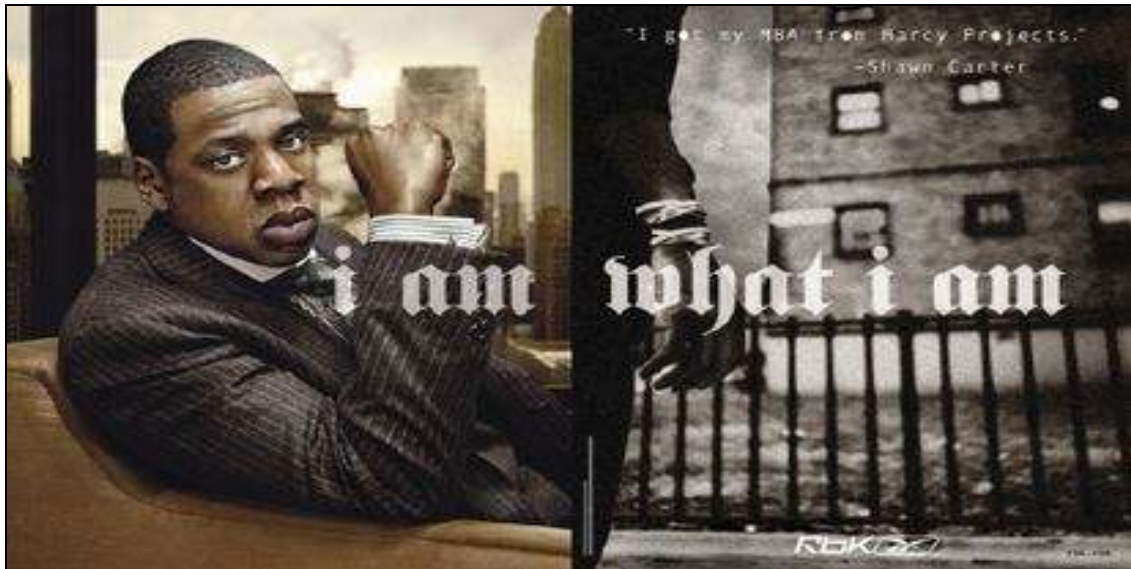
3 B

Figure 3 A & B: Jay Z
Top: Rocawear ads featuring Jay Z (Rocawear Website, May 15, 2007)
Bottom: Reebok ad featuring Jay Z (Photo District News Website, May 15, 2007)

The three hip-hop clothing brands in this study are inextricably linked to the personal biographies of their founders.[4] Sean John, Rocawear, and Baby Phat were all created by Black men (Sean John "Diddy" Combs, Shawn "Jay Z" Carter, and Russell Simmons respectively) who achieved initial success by producing and/or performing hip-hop, then diversified their investment portfolios, and are now considered to be the richest men in the industry.[5] These guys are living the American dream and have the mansions, yachts, luxury cars, and private jets to prove it. For example, as CEO of Def Jam records, Jay Z is now, quite literally, sitting in the director's chair (Figure 3A). And yet, as McLeod (1999) and Smith (2003) point out, these men must constantly refer back to the streets to "keep it real" and maintain the authenticity of their hip-hop brand. Claiming that "I got my MBA from the Marcy Projects" (Figure 3B), Jay Z often frames his conspicuous consumption as "the fruits of labor" and the happy ending to a rags to riches story. In this way, Jay Z's success is not only measured by where he is, but also by just how far he's come (Barboza, 2001, p. 1). Though hailing from a more middle class background, Diddy justifies his high-profile lifestyle by sticking his thumb in the eye of the White establishment. His infamous "White Parties" in the Hamptons along with his "ghettofabulous" material excess espouse what Perry (2004) has called "'I'm Black, from the hood, *and* I wear Versace' values" (p. 197). So, while bringing "bling" to the hood, Diddy also uses his wealth to reverse-colonize heretofore exclusive White spaces:

> I'm the one driving around in the Rolls-Royce with his hat turned, goin' down Fifth Avenue with the system booming in the back. Walkin' into Gucci, shuttin' it down, buying everything at the motherfuckin' same time! Driving up to Harlem, out to 125th Street, and on my way back downtown goin' and givin' hundred-dollar bills to homeless people....My race needs to see that...if you're a White person, you've seen the Kennedys, the Rockefellers, the Rothschilds. You have history pictures of White people living affluently. You go to golf courses. You've been invited to country clubs. We haven't — you know what I'm saying? (Diddy quoted in Kamp, 1998, pp. 256, 269)

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[4] Fleetwood (2005) argues that hip-hop clothing is so lucrative that it now rivals the music and "the emergence of the hip-hop musician/producer turned fashion designer" has inspired a whole host of high-profile hip-hop artists to follow suit (p. 330). Some of the new players include Nelly (Apple Bottoms), Beyoncé (House of Dereon), 50 Cent (G Unit), and Kanye West (Pastelle). LL Cool J (Todd Smith) summed up the transition thusly: "LL's a rapper. Todd Smith is a brand." (Navarro, 2006, p. 1).

[5] Sean John "Diddy" Combs tops the list with an estimated net worth of $346 million, followed by Shawn "Jay Z" Carter with $340 Million, Russell Simmons with $325 Million, and Damon Dash (who co-founded Rocawear with Jay Z) is in fourth place with $200 Million ("Richest in Hip-Hop," December 4, 2006). Dash launched Roc-a-Fella records with Jay Z in 1996 and says that they both shared the same ambition: "We wanted to be known for making money. All we talked about was making money and how to spend it, what the best of everything was and how bad we wanted it" (Dash quoted in Konigsberg, 2006, p. 1). Though Dash takes credit for designing Rocawear and creating an ad campaign "so fly it could be in Vogue," he was bought out of the company in 2005 and is no longer associated with the brand (ibid.).

3C   **3D**

Figure 3C & D: Jay Z and Kimora Lee
Baby Phat ads featuring Kimora Lee (Baby Phat Style, December 4, 2006)

Finally, Simmons, widely considered to be the original pioneer of hip-hop fashion, has taken his Phat Farm brand one step farther, spinning it off into Baby Phat, a women's hip-hop clothing brand and a vehicle for his (then) wife Kimora Lee Simmons. Baby Phat has been a resounding success and, though the couple has since divorced, they have maintained their business relationship; Kimora Lee retains creative control of Baby Phat and remains the very public face of the brand — often appearing in ad campaigns along with her two children posing amidst the lush topiary gardens and yawning marble hallways of the family's vast estate (Figure 3C/3D). Like Diddy and Jay Z, Kimora Lee is well aware that living large only enhances the value of the Baby Phat brand: "My life is very — big. I'm filthy fucking rich!…It's aspirational. They like my house, they like my cars, they buy my clothes — get it?" (Kimora Lee quoted in Sales, 2005, p. 1) In sum, brand bloodlines can be figurative (allusions to the Black Panthers) or quite literal (Kimora Lee and her daughters) and the message, in the syncretic tradition of hip-hop, can both protest material inequality and embrace excessive materialism. Moreover, the founders of Sean John, Rocawear, and Baby Phat loudly proclaim their loyalty to the (Black) streets while cavorting with the (White) elite floating at the top of the social pyramid. It's a flight of fancy that Kimora Lee invites us to take with her every time we put on a Baby Phat shirt.

Texts and Methods

I drew my sample of children's clothing advertisements from two issues of *Cookie*, an upscale parenting magazine targeting young affluent mothers.[6] I favored ads depicting very "mature" modes of

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[6] *Cookie* magazine targets women age 25-34 with household incomes of $75,000 or above and children age 0-9. Readership is estimated to be 84% female, 79% parents, and 58% people with household

address: children looking directly into the camera at eye-level while wearing a serious facial expression. To estimate how often this occurred, I conducted a content analysis of the January 2006 and September 2006 issues of *Cookie*. Of the 26 full page ads for children's clothing in the first issue, 10 (or 38%) of the ads featured at least one child model who was both looking directly at the camera and not smiling. The September issue also yielded a similar percentage: out of a total of 40 full-page ads, 16 (or 40%) had a child looking out at the viewer without a smile. When I further narrowed my selection to hip-hop children's clothing brands, the results were even more dramatic. The January issue of *Cookie* had two ads (Rocawear Kids and Baby Phat Girlz) and all five of the child models in these ads were both wearing serious expressions and looking into the camera at, or above, eye-level (Figures 8D and 9D). The September issue included ads for Applebottoms Girls, Enyce, Rocawear Kids (Figure 6), and Sean John Young Moguls (Figure 4). Of the child models featured in these ads, 10 out of 16 (or 63%) were looking out at the viewer without a smile. I should note that two of the ads that did not exhibit the "mature" mode of address were also part of the Young Moguls series (Figure 4). And, since magazine media is typically encountered as a visual diptych of two opposing pages, I would like to argue that such couplings often work in tandem. Indeed, Messaris (1994) has described how *physical* proximity of messages might lead to a transfer of meaning. We should, therefore, whenever possible, examine visual texts within the context of their consumption. In that spirit, the Young Moguls series is shown below in the order that it appeared in *Cookie.*
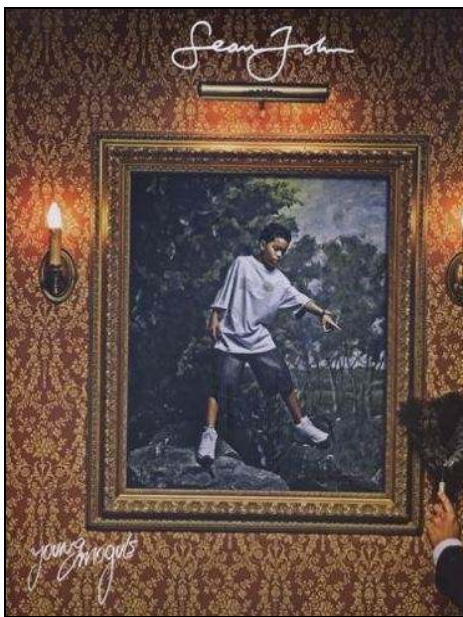
incomes over $75,000. The average reader is believed to be 36 years old. ("*Cookie* Circulation," December 4, 2006)

4 A

4 B

4 C

4 D

Figure 4 : Ads for Sean John Young Moguls
(*Cookie*, September 2006)

Visual sequences often tell a story and, in this case, the protagonist is clear. We follow the same "young mogul" through a typical day: presiding over the corporate boardroom (4A), laughing at his old, White chauffer getting soaked in the rain (4B), telling his White butler that he missed a spot (4C), and assuming a "cool pose" in front of his private jet, flanked by bodyguards (4D). Each ad relates to the other and the sequential placement reinforces their collective meaning by immersing the reader in the symbolic world of the brand. My point here is that coding and counting these ads as separate entities largely misses the point. For example, though serious expressions form the book-ends of the series, I did not code 4B as a "mature" form of address because the subject was smiling — connoting passivity. And yet, the particular scenario of the ad actually denotes a position of domination — the child over the chauffer — a power dynamic which is, in turn, echoed by the other images. I will conduct a more detailed textual analysis of 4D below (Figure 7), but suffice it to say that context — both within the ad itself and throughout its immediate visual surroundings — matters.

This brings us to an inherent flaw in my research design but one quite familiar to visual analysis: any attempt to code and control variables inevitably becomes entangled in the complicated system of signs that can be assembled by a single image. A smile is never just a smile. Not only do signs communicate by accessing the subjective referent systems of each viewer, but they also *interact* with each other, reverberating as through an echo chamber and gaining meaning through a constant ricochet of mental association. Thus, my category of a "mature" form of address, like most cultural knowledge, is necessarily rough and incomplete, porous and evolving.

In addition to the genre's propensity for the "cool pose" and "mature" modes of address, I had other reasons for limiting my sample to hip-hop children's clothing. First, including more preppie brands such as Ralph Lauren and Kenneth Cole would introduce a level of cross-cultural comparison that fell outside the scope of this project.[7] To make it plain: preppie brand models tend to be White while hip-hop models tend to be Black. And while exploring the racist cultural ideologies that so distinguish White faces from Black ones would certainly make for an interesting study, there simply isn't space for it here.[8] Second, I wanted to analyze a set of ads from the same genre of fashion and hip-hop clothing, being a recent invention, offered a fairly bounded universe. Third, Sean John, Rocawear, and Baby Phat all had ads appearing in multiple issues of *Cookie*, suggesting that each individual ad was part of a larger, ongoing campaign. Finally, I was able to secure adult ads for all three of these brands, thus allowing me to analyze the children's ads within the context of their adult equivalents.[9] In other words, all of my cross-generational comparisons occur within the same brand.

As an exercise in semiotic textual analysis (Saussure, 1966; Williamson 1978), this study neither presumes to know how specific audiences respond to advertisements of hip-hop clothing for kids, nor pretends to explain the original intent of those who constructed the ads. Instead, I draw on Stuart Hall's

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[7] I have pursued this cross-cultural comparison elsewhere. For a more elaborate treatment of both preppie and hip-hop iterations of designer children's clothing ads, see Boulton (2007).

[8] For an interesting historical view on this, see Smith (1998).

[9] I drew the adult ads from various online sources.

(1980) conception of the mass media as a "continuous circuit" of cultural production whereby a message produced within a particular material/institutional context is translated into discourse (encoding) and then interpreted (decoding) by audiences through daily social practices. In such a system, advertisers must draw on these discursive maps of already-established cultural conventions in order to successfully communicate with their intended audience. This is what Goffman (1979) meant by the "hyper-ritualization" of advertisements which do not reflect actual social roles so much as distill them into an ideal form so that they might be more easily recognized. And yet, despite advertisers' efforts to promote a single, preferred reading of their message, Hall (1980) points out that audiences negotiate meaning through their own interpretive lens, informed by previous experience. Therefore, rather than make any claims about arriving at specific conclusions, I focus my analysis on theorizing potential pathways of interpretation. It's the route, not the destination that interests me here.

Para-Proxemics

I wish to argue that the print advertisements in this study engage in an interpersonal — albeit brief — symbolic exchange with their audience. More specifically, the relationship between the depicted subjects (child models) and hailed viewers (affluent mothers) is one which Meyrowitz (1986) has described as "para-proxemic" — a form of mediated body language analogous to everyday social interaction. For example, Meyrowitz posits that, by breaking up the action into distinct shots of various distance, television is able to approximate relationships in real life: a wide shot can suggest emotional distance, while a close-up might imply the presence or intimacy or trust. In a similar vein, Messaris (1997) notes that high camera angles tend to belittle their subjects while low angles can simulate a child's point of view looking up at a taller, more powerful figure of authority. Thus these images are encoded with connotative meanings that can trigger snap judgments accessing the "referent systems" of our lived experience.

One of the most consistent para-proxemic devices in these advertisements of hip-hop clothing for children is the use of direct address: most of the child-models stare straight into the camera. How are we to interpret this look? Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) urge us to consider the perspective of images in order that we might understand what it would take to simulate these particular points of view: "'Who could see this scene in this way?' 'Where would one have to be to see this scene this way, and what sort of person would one have to be to occupy that space?' (p. 149). In real life, adults most often observe children from above. But this is not the perspective of these ads. Of the 16 child models who appeared in full-page ads for hip-hop clothing in the January and September issues of *Cookie*, 14 (or 88%) face the camera with their heads in a neutral position or tilted slightly downward. In other words, almost all of the children are not only looking straight-out, but also straight-*ahead*, as though addressing a peer of similar stature. This is especially significant since our referent system of actual social interactions tends to place adults as "higher up" than children both literally (height) and figuratively (rank). In order to "get down to their level," we must sit, crouch, or kneel. And that is exactly what the Rocawear Kids photographer did on the set of a recent photo shoot (Figure 5). And Rocawear isn't the only designer children's clothing brand willing to go to great lengths in order to attain this particular "look." When reviewing the Website for Jet Set Kids, a child modeling talent agency, I discovered behind-the-scenes images depicting several fashion photographers genuflecting at their models' feet (Figure 5):

Figure 5: Children's Clothing Photo Shoots
Top left: Ad for Rocawear Kids (*Cookie*, January 2006)
Top right: Rocawear photo shoot (Rocawear Website, December 4, 2006)
Bottom left to right: Photo shoots for Guess, Ralph Lauren, and Tommy Hilfiger
(Jet Set Kids Website, December 4, 2006)

Some ads went further than eye-line parity. For example, the Rocawear Kids ad (Figure 5) places the viewer on the level of the boy seated in the foreground. Consequently, the two boys standing in the background actually gaze down at us. By positioning the viewer as below the child models, the ad elevates the child models and thus exaggerates their relative strength and power. Like a "special effect," which tricks the eye in order to make a normal person look like a giant, these ads not only increase the child

models' relative height, they also make a para-proxemic appeal to the connotative meaning of literally "looking up" to someone of superior rank.

Prolepsis

I should stress that the Rocawear Kids ad above (Figure 5) was the exception in my sample, not the rule. Nevertheless, it helps guide us to the heart of the matter — namely that eye-line has ideological consequences. If looking down implies domination and looking up submission, then gazes which are aligned on the same plane suggest a relationship of equality. Remember that the intended viewers for these ads are not other children, but mothers. By stripping away the more realistic adult view which typically comes from above, these ads lift children up into an imaginary world where adults and children regard each other as equals. Furthermore, I contend that hip-hop clothing advertisements depicting non-smiling children in eye-level direct address encode the images with a certain maturity and self-awareness. When facing the camera, these child models are neither bashful nor goofy — they are "cool." With their emotions firmly under control, they display a self-assured, haute couture-style expression.

In the photo essay that follows, I have extracted headshots from print ads for the same designer brand (adult version on the left, child version on the right) and included the full ads at the bottom of the page for reference. When you view the images, keep in mind that, for Messaris (1998), print advertising is all about the right look:

> It is probably the nature of the spokesperson's gaze, together with his or her general facial expression, that plays the most important role among the various attentional cues that are directly modeled on real-world behavior … we tend to be especially responsive to visual cues coming from relatively narrow zones encompassing their eyes and mouths (p. 23).

Figure 6: Rocawear Ads
On left: Ad for Rocawear (BW Greyscale Website (September 10, 2006)
On right: Ad for Rocawear Kids (*Cookie*, September 2006)

When we compare the Rocawear and Rocawear Kids ad (Figure 6), it appears that the children's ad is built upon the same visual template already established by the adult ad. In other words, Rocawear establishes the identity of the brand as a form of visual currency which, in turn, adds value to Rocawear Kids. In this example, there are many symbols that reinforce the hereditary relationship, ranging from color palette, logo, and style of clothing to the physical resemblance of the models. But I wish to argue that the transaction of meaning between these two ads is also based on a similar form of facial expression. As Messaris (1997) observes, haute couture models generally avoid smiling in favor of sullen, proud, even contemptuous expressions that seem devoid of empathy or interest towards others (p. 40). Berger describes this "absent, unfocused look" as a powerful gesture designed to invite envy (p. 133). Both the models in the Rocawear ads are wearing an ever-so-slight smirk. They appear to be deeply self-aware, self-assured, and even smug. So similar is their demeanor that I have superimposed each model's face on the other's body to illustrate the semiotic process whereby the image of the child refers to existing images of adults. The mode of address and confident expression that the models hold in common make the mutual head-swap appear almost seamless. This is, in essence, the function of prolepsis. By visually rhyming the child model with her adult equivalents, these print ads invite the viewer to infer that the girl on the right is, to paraphrase Goffman (1979, p. 38), merely waiting to unfold into the woman we see on the left.

We can try a similar analytical trick with advertisements for Sean John. For this brand, the name of the children's line ("Young Moguls") says it all:
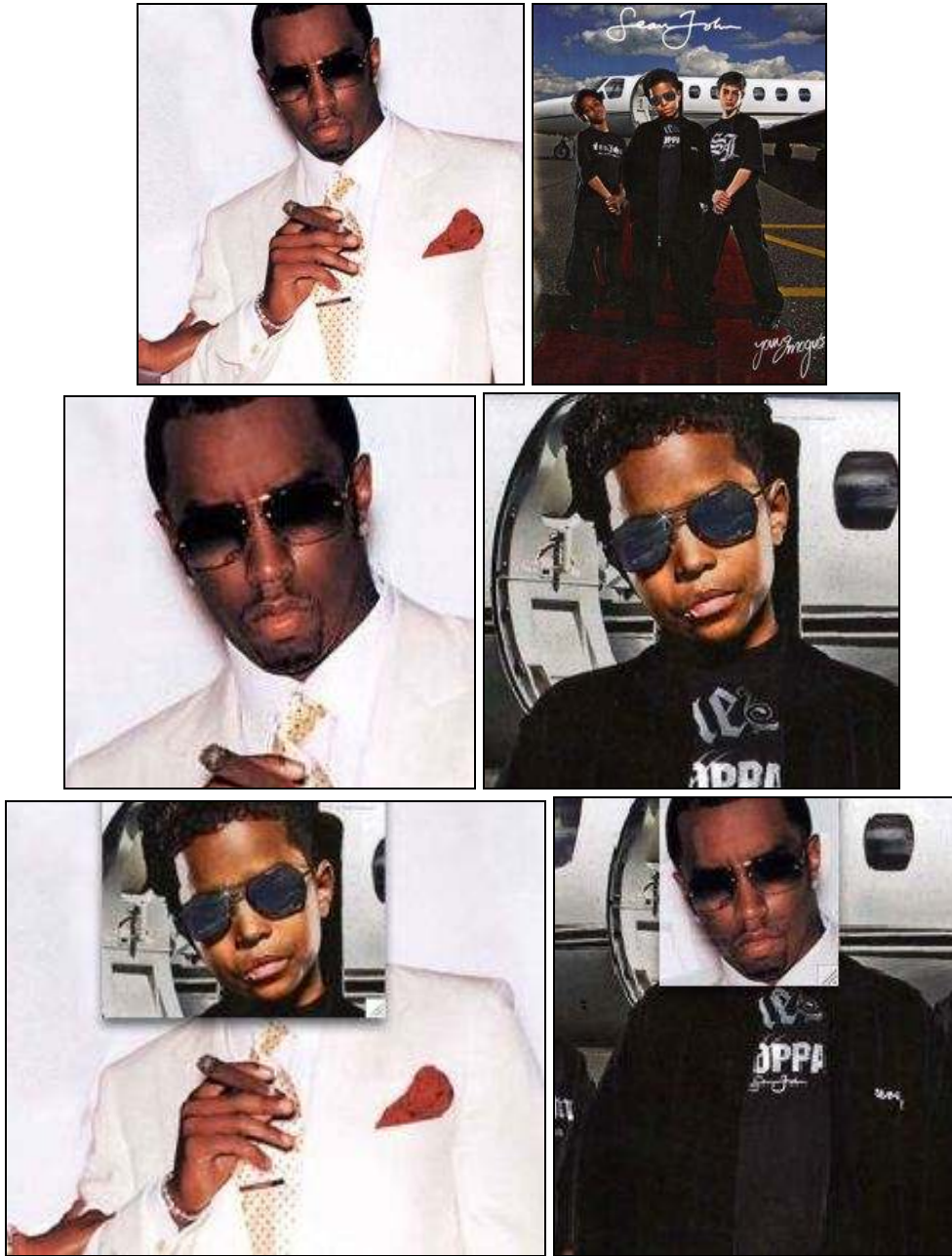
Figure 7: Sean John Ads
On left: Image of Diddy (Sean John Website, September 10, 2006)
On right: Ad for Sean John Young Moguls (*Cookie*, September 2006)

As noted above, Sean John "Diddy" Combs, is both the founder of Sean John and the embodiment of the lifestyle espoused by the brand. In short, as a highly successful hip-hop entrepreneur, he is the ruler of a vast empire. On the left, Diddy is wearing sunglasses, frowning, tilting his head, and holding a cigar. The central character in the "Young Moguls" ad on the right, apparently a younger version of Diddy himself, is also wearing sunglasses, frowning, tilting his head, and holding a toothpick — a well-known gangster cliché — in his mouth. To further inflate the boy's importance, he is placed in front of a private jet, flanked by security guards. Again, I have switched the heads of the child and the adult in order to demonstrate how their common mode of address and expression makes them virtually interchangeable. Finally, take a closer look at the boy's face. There is a reason why he was hired for this job; he has a clean complexion and symmetrical features. Prolepsis occurs when the child model who promises to grow up to be handsome, is at once *already* handsome. Were he to smile, or exaggerate his posturing, we might be tempted to call him cute thus dismissing him as a silly child mugging for the camera. But this boy is deadly serious. Like Diddy, he is not afraid of your gaze. The unspoken message of the Sean John "Young Moguls" ad is quite simple: a boy dressed like a prince is destined to be king.
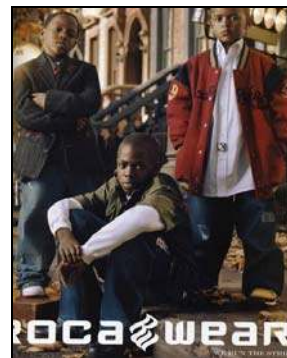
8 A

8 B
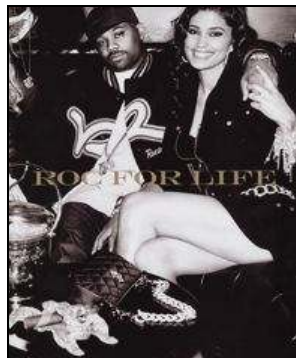
8 C

8 D

Figure 8: Rocawear Ads
On left: Roc for Life (BW Grey Scale Website, December 4, 2006)
On right: Ad for Rocawear Kids (*Cookie*, January 2006)

The Rocawear ad features Damon Dash who, along with Jay Z, was one of the original founders of the Rocawear brand, sitting next to his wife, Rachel Roy, who, like Kimora Lee, has since launched her own highly successful fashion line (Figure 8C). Notice that, echoing the gender expectations outlined above, Dash wears a serious expression while Roy smiles. As mentioned earlier, two of the three boys in the Rocawear Kids ad are actually looking down at the viewer (8D). Now compare Dash's face (8A) with one of the boys from the Rocawear Kids ad (8B). Not only do their facial expressions rhyme — serious affect and half-closed eyes — but they both have their heads cocked to one side in a kind of "tough guy" pose. Finally, in a remarkable display of mutual age-compression, the boy (8B) is wearing a very grown-up pinstriped wool blazer while the adult (8A) sports a boy-ish baseball cap and varsity jacket. Nevertheless, the primary thrust of the prolepsis is upwardly mobile: the boy's smoldering eyes suggest a fire of manhood is already burning in his belly.

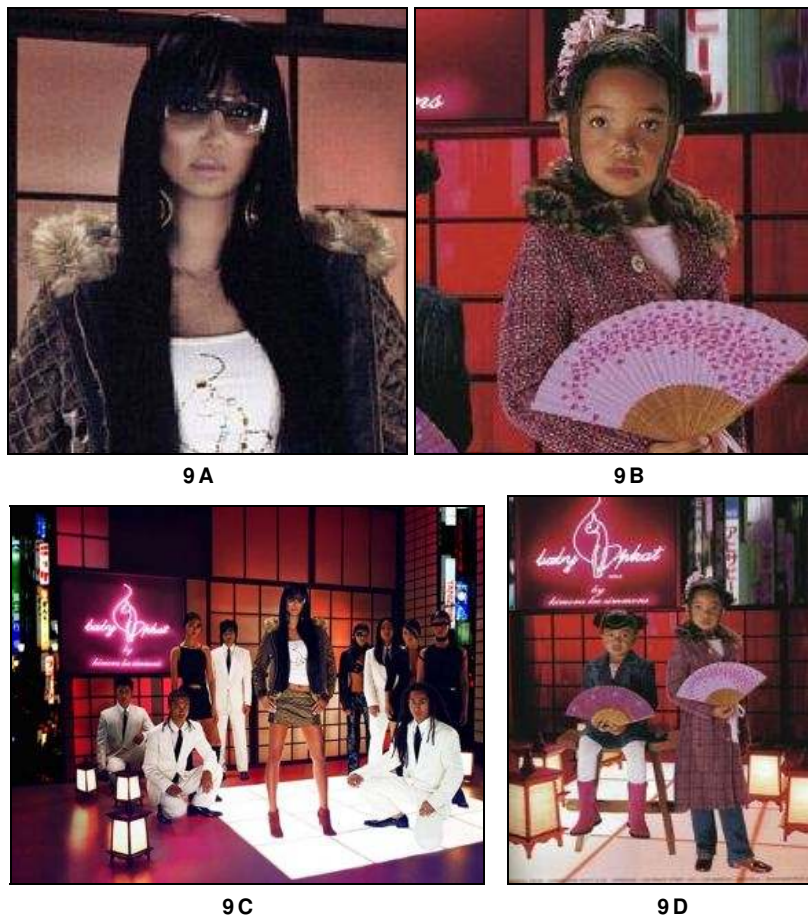9 A   9 B

9 C   9 D

Figure 9: Baby Phat Ads
On left: Ad for Baby Phat (Brett Ratner website, December 4, 2006)
On right: Ad for Baby Phat Girlz (*Cookie* Magazine, January 2006)

The Baby Phat ads (Figure 9), in addition to eye-gaze and expression (9A/9B), also achieve prolepsis through two levels of context, both internal and external to the ads themselves. First, on a formal level, we can see that their visual structure shares the same backdrop: orange-tinged rice paper walls, a purple neon Baby Phat sign, vertical strips of what appear to be blurred kanji characters, a floor illuminated from below, and wooden lanterns. Thus the adult and child models — though existing in separate ads — occupy the same symbolic world. The second level of context is more latent and thus depends on what knowledge/s the viewer brings to bear on the act of interpretation. For example, when I view these ads, I search through the files of my own unique "referent system" and come up with several entries for the woman depicted in the ad. Her name is Kimora Lee. As the creative designer of the Baby Phat brand, she enjoys considerable clout in the fashion industry. Thus, her highly masculine "cool pose" as a quasi-Hong Kong gangster resonates with her material circumstance (9C). She is, after all, the boss. I also know that the two girls pictured in the Baby Phat Girlz ad are Kimora Lee's daughters, Ming and Aoki (9D). So, in my case, this extra-textual knowledge of an actual real-life mother-daughter relationship further exacerbates the effect of prolepsis since, in addition to sharing their mother's DNA, Ming and Aoki could very well stand to inherit the family business. Perhaps more so than the other brands in this study, Baby Phat embodies the visual foretaste of the future. In other words, images of the girls co-exist with what they are going to become: Ming is not just a girl, she's the next Kimora Lee. Better yet, photographing Ming with such a knowing and self-aware expression suggests that, in many ways, Ming already is Kimora Lee.

Figure 10: Ads for Baby Phat (See Figure 9 for citations)

Conclusion: Little Diddy

I have sought to demonstrate that many of the children's clothing ads in this study depict the young models as possessing a level of maturity typically reserved for adults. The images accomplish this symbolic transfer of meaning in three ways. First, the children look directly into the camera at eye level, thus setting up a para-proxemic relationship of equality with the hypothetical adult viewer of the ad — in this case, affluent mothers reading Cookie magazine. Furthermore, some of the children even tilt their heads such that they are actually looking down at us with more than a hint of condescension. Second, the images combine direct eye contact with a serious facial expression, violating expectations of passive,

obedient children who smile for the camera with an alternative vision: savvy, self-aware kids conducting impression management through the presentation of a "cool" front. Finally, since these children's clothing ads often mimic the visual conventions of their adult equivalents, they draw their meaning from the same referent system and thus create a prolepsis — a brand bloodline or chain of signification — which links the present to the future.

Given that childhood is a contested cultural concept, the potential implications of these ads are wide ranging and contradictory. On one hand, we have the Romantic view that childhood should be carefully kept as a secret garden of purity and innocence. For instance, if we believe adulthood should be cordoned off as an exclusive club where membership includes, among other rights and privileges, access to sexual activity, then we should be wary of any images that offer entrance to children. In other words, we might see the ads in this study as akin to fake IDs — visual constructions of children striking poses, copping attitudes, and trying to "pass" for adults. According to this view, depictions of "knowing" children are a dangerous bluff that uses setting, appearance, and — most importantly — manner to *conceal* the developmental stage of the child, thus fooling adults into expecting children to grow up too fast. Sexual maturity, then, would not be so much exposed by the body as expressed in the face. On the other hand, perhaps the partitioning of childhood and adulthood is based on a false cultural assumption: the innocence and asexuality of children. From this perspective, some of the images in this study could challenge the more docile and restrictive notions of childhood by simply acknowledging that young people are more complex than many of us care to admit. In other words, the visual circulation of sophisticated children could form new referent systems for adults and thereby help liberate a concept long imprisoned by the gilded cage of Romanticism. Of course, the preferred reading of these ads remains elusive, leaving us to make meaning through our own interpretive pathways — routes to understanding that are littered with countless references to previous visual experiences. Thus, the judgment of whether these ads are cause for lament or celebration truly lies in the eye of their beholder. But, regardless of which side you are you on, it should be abundantly clear that the parapets and sentries guarding childhood have long been unevenly distributed. For example, when a White girl is abducted or abused, particularly from within a (safe) suburban context, it's always news (i.e., JonBenet Ramsey). Not so for girls of color living in the (dangerous) inner-city who are quickly written off as victims of their environment.

Though more research is required to tease out the myriad ways in which contemporary cultural notions of childhood are underpinned by racist ideologies, the preceding analysis suggests that hip-hop clothing ads might be engaging in a very specific — and complex — symbolic exercise when these ads pose children in adult-like ways. For instance, I have argued that smiling is both the default expression for portrait photography and a highly gendered act associated with femininity, passivity, and weakness. Therefore, when models — particularly women — do *not* smile for the camera, the resulting images challenge the established system of social expectations. I would like to suggest that this bold, confrontational gaze takes on new meanings as an emblematic convention of hip-hop culture. The "cool pose" may be an aspirational coping mechanism by which any poor, Black boy can salvage his pride by suggesting that he is, in fact, a "Young Mogul" just waiting to happen. It is a performance of a performance, described by Kamp (1998) as Diddy's trademark look: "eyes either unexpressive or hidden behind shades — what behavioral psychologists call flat affect" (p. 270).

While falling short of more material forms of empowerment, advertisements that use clothing and manner to rhyme Black children with 1) a multimillionaire who grew up in the hood, 2) a "ghettofabulous" impresario, and 3) a trophy wife turned successful businesswoman/single mother, are nonetheless deeply compelling expressions of Black power. To paraphrase Diddy, White people may have their Rockefellers, but Jay Z has Roca-fella records, and Black folks, in turn, can buy Rocawear for themselves and their kids. And yet, as Kitlowitz (2000) points out, "fashions grow long limbs that, in the end, are only distantly connected to their roots" (p. 72). In other words, by the time Rocawear reaches the public, the original Rockefeller referent may very well be lost. The same might be said of Diddy's impersonation of Tommie Smith or Naomi Campbell's homage to Huey Newton, but the overall message is clear: the ambitious upward mobility of hip-hop grew out of a distinctly Black experience of institutional racism and material deprivation. And since Rocawear, Sean John, and Baby Phat sell an American dream that, for most, will remain endlessly deferred, the success of one's child becomes very serious business indeed. In the pursuit of happiness, innocence is a luxury these child models simply can't afford.

Figure 11: 2006 *Child Magazine* Fashion Show
At the *Child Magazine* fashion show during New York Fashion Week, Rocawear, Sean John, and Baby Phat showed their new children's collections alongside more established white/preppie designer brands like Calvin Klein, DKNY, Guess, and Kenneth Cole ("Tots," 2006).
Left: Ming and Aoki Lee on the "kitten walk" (Blog Kimora Website, May 10, 2006)
Right: Kimora Lee and Russell Simmons cheer on their daughter, Ming. (ibid.)

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