

The Spectacular Consumption of “True” African American Culture: “Whassup?” with the Budweiser Guys?

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□—*Spectacular consumption is a process through which the relations among cultural forms, the culture industry, and the lived experiences of persons are shaped by public consumption. This essay examines how the spectacular consumption of “Whassup?!” Budweiser advertising is constitutive of white American ambivalence toward “authentic” blackness. The essay argues that Budweiser’s hottest ad campaign benefits from a tension between the depiction of “universal” values and the simultaneous representation of distinctive culture. The illustration of blackness as sameness and blackness as otherness arises out of conflicted attitudes toward black culture. Thus, Budweiser’s strategic attempts to regulate and administer “authentic” blackness as a market value also reproduce this ambivalence. Furthermore, as an object of spectacular consumption, the meaning of “authentic” black life and culture is partly generative of mediated and mass marketed images.*

Charles Stone, III, must have felt as though he had gone to sleep and awoken in Oz. It was three short years ago that he captured on film candid moments among three of his friends, edited them into an engrossing and visually stunning short film called “True,” and used it as a video resumé.

Stone was “floored” when Anheuser-Busch asked him to translate his film into a 60-second commercial spot for Budweiser beer (McCarthy, 2000, p. 8B). Stone was equally surprised when, out of respect for “realism,” he was allowed to cast those same friends from the short film for the commercial. It must have seemed even more surreal to be in Cannes during the summer of 2000 to accept the advertising world’s version of the “Oscar,” the Grand Prix and Golden Lion, and to hear his friends’ greeting, now the world’s most famous catchphrase, bouncing off café walls and rippling along the beaches—“Whassup?!” It must have been bizarre to witness the usually stodgy Cannes judges joyfully exchanging the greeting in international accents—especially since the advertising elite admits to a cultivated distaste for the popular (Mc-

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Carthy, 2000). This admission, however, didn't hurt the market value of the Budweiser "True" commercials one bit. To understand why this is so, one must explore the nature of spectacular consumption.

Let us begin our journey by considering this odd commentary offered up by *Advertising Age's* ad review staff after Stone's commercial aired during the 2000 Superbowl: "A bunch of friends, all black, greet each other with exaggerated 'Wuzupppppppp?' salutations that sound like retching. [Our] staff, the single whitest enclave outside of Latvia, doesn't quite get it but suspects it is very funny . . ." (Garfield, 2000b, p. 4). But, what's so mysterious? These guys simply greet each other—over and over—with what has been described as a "verbal high-five" (Farhi, 2000, p. C1). Also of interest is the fact that *USA Today's* Admeter rated the commercial as the Superbowl's most popular; and so let us turn the question on its axis: if *Advertising Age* is correct and the humor is baffling, why is it so popular? After all, the ad is about four friends sitting around doing "nothin'[but] watching the game, having a Bud"? How is it that a series of commercials about four African American friends can be simultaneously "pretty out there," incomprehensible, and yet enjoy such massive appeal so as to become Budweiser's hottest ad campaign ever? (Adande, 2000, p. D1).

The pop culture craze associated with the "Whassup?!" guys leaves some observers dumbfounded and amazed. But others chalk up the frenzy to either the universality of male bonding or to white America's continued fascination with black expression. On the one hand, the commercials' appeal is associated with these ads' depiction of a classic and commonly inarticulate male-bond-

ing ritual. From this perspective, the secret to their popularity lies in their utter *familiarity*. On the other hand, their appeal is linked to the notion that the ads are "weird," "oddball," "strange," "funky," and "True": that is, "authentically" black. In other words, their appeal is also predicated upon their *unfamiliarity*.

Due to its parsimony, this dichotomy between the universal and the distinctive is misleading. If we perceive the ads as "universal" expressions of masculine communal norms, they speak in a single, unproblematic voice. They say, in essence, "I love you, man!" This time, the men just *happen* to be black. Thus, through a projection of "positive realism" (Cassidy & Katula, 1995), the "Whassup?!" ads testify to increased diversity in television commercials and to African American male affection. Understood in this manner, the American ideal of human universalism is affirmed through a display of black fraternal care made familiar. Indeed, according to David English, an Anheuser-Busch vice-president, the "universal" appeal of the short film allowed him to look "past the color of the guys to the situation of guys being guys, and the communication between friends" (Heller, 2000, p. 11). Hence, in attempts to explain the soaring market value of these ads, Anheuser-Busch spokespersons often reference their "universality"—that is, their colorlessness. But, since the ads are also described as "cool" and "edgy," and the "Whassup?!" guys are widely perceived as the hippest group of friends on TV, they signify a pleasure principle orienting white consumption of blackness (hooks, 1992). And so, it has occurred to us that this dichotomy between the universal and the distinctive conceals a strategy. That is, references to the ads'

“universal” qualities obscure the way in which blackness can be made to behave in accordance with the American ideology of universalism. By encouraging viewers to “celebrate” blackness conceived in terms of *sameness*, the ad campaign deflects attention away from the ways in which blackness as *otherness* is annexed and appropriated as commodity and hides from view the fact that American culture exhibits a profound *ambivalence* toward “authentic” blackness (Entman & Rojecki, 2000).

This essay seeks to explore this ambivalence as it is reproduced and displayed through Budweiser’s “Whassup?!” ad campaign. We argue that the ad campaign constitutes and administers cultural “authenticity” as a market value. From the perspective of spectacular consumption, the intensity of the pleasure of consuming the other is directly (and paradoxically) related to the replication and magnification of “authentic” difference. Moreover, the logic of spectacular consumption compels us to pay attention to how the act of consumption transforms the relation between the consumer and the consumed. We contend that as the market economy seeks to regulate and integrate “authentic” difference, white American ambivalence toward blackness is paradoxically both assuaged by its “universality” and heightened by its distinctiveness. This conflicted set of impulses and feelings can be witnessed in the commercials, disclosed in corporate strategy, and observed in focus group interviews. Hence, this essay proceeds in three stages: first, we explicate what we mean by spectacular consumption, relating it to the commodification of the “Whassup?!” guys. Second, we provide an interpretation of the original commercial so as to show how

white American ambivalence concerning race is inscribed in the ad. Third, we discuss the results of focus group interviews that were used to gain insight into “consumer” perceptions of the ads. We conclude with some observations about the on-going development of the “Whassup” line of commercials and the racial ambivalence they promote.

Spectacular Consumption and the Reproduction of the “Authentic”

Treating the spectacle as a rhetorical construction, David E. Procter focuses his critical attention on how a spectacle as an “event” can be called forth by rhetors seeking to build community (1990, p. 118). Drawing from the work of Murray Edelman, Thomas B. Farrell and others, Procter posits the concept of a “dynamic spectacle” as requiring “a fusion of material event with the symbolic construction of that event and with audience needs” (1990, p. 119). From this perspective, the spectacle is a choreographed happening like a celebration or memorial that brings together the interpretive materials for rhetorical *praxis*. As Procter’s analysis demonstrates, the critic is charged with the task of determining how rhetoric transformed the material event into a spectacle and how the spectacle builds community. Our understanding of spectacle both converges with and diverges from this account. We share Procter’s concern with the constructed nature of spectacle and the capacity of interested persons to shape it. In particular, we find useful Procter’s understanding of spectacle as a mediated phenomenon that transforms persons’ lived reality. However, we do not conceive of spectacle as an event or as a

happening, with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and an end; here, the spectacle is a *condition*—a characteristic of our collective being. It must, therefore, be understood ontologically as well as rhetorically.

Guy DeBord (1983), in *Society of the Spectacle*, explains that as social systems shift from industrial to post-industrial economies they also undergo ontological change. Rather than being organized around the exchange of goods based upon actual use values, the spectacle establishes mass consumption as a way of life. When sign value replaces use value as the foundation of being in this fashion, human beings need no longer be concerned with discovering the essence of *Dasein*, for the “true” nature of one’s being is up for grabs; it can be fabricated through *appearances* (Best & Kellner, 1997; Ewen, 1988). In the society of the spectacle, even facets of one’s very body can be manufactured in keeping with the latest trend. Importantly, as Jean Baudrillard (1984) has forewarned, a society’s capacity to replicate and manipulate forms of public culture forces upon all of us a virtual supersedure of the life world by the signifiers that previously represented it. By destabilizing the ways through which we ascribe meaning and value to our experiences, the spectacle mediates our understanding of the world through a distribution of commercialized signs. Although this process may not be conspiratorial (Hall, 1995), it is hardly random; the economics of the spectacle lead to the orchestration of meaning and value so as to realize the “moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life” (DeBord, 1983, p. 13). As the spectacle structures both work and play, diverse aspects of life are made significant inasmuch as they can be made

marketable. Thus, these processes magnify—that is, make spectacular—previously private worlds and the persons who inhabit them.

Spectacular consumption is, thus, structured in a fashion different from traditional spectacle; its rhetorics respond to cultural variables in diverse patterns oriented by the logic of sign value. A key rhetorical resource in the economy of spectacular consumption, then, is the paradoxical tension between the “different” and the widely available. On the one hand, the pleasure of consuming otherness is advanced by the Other’s uniqueness. On the other hand, in a mass consumer culture, commodity value rises to a sufficient level only when the Other undergoes massive replication: “In a hyperreal culture, things are conceived from the point of view of *reproducibility*, as we come to think something is *real* only insofar as it exists as a serialized commodity, as able to be bought and sold, as able to be made into a novel or a movie” (Best & Kellner, 1997, p. 102, emphasis added). The consuming rhetoric of the spectacle thus promotes a contradiction as it seeks strategically to reproduce on a massive scale the singularity associated with the “authentic.” And yet these attempts persist because the market value of such reproductions escalates as long as the “aura” of “authenticity” can be maintained (Benjamin, 1984).

Clearly, cultural difference provides a particularly valuable resource for spectacular consumption. The differences found among cultures provide a resource of the new and the unfamiliar that is particularly valuable because those differences can be projected as “authentic” even as they are commercially manufactured. In the case of the Budweiser ads, public consumption of

the ads triggers an overvaluation and fabrication of black bodies in living spaces represented as “real life.” Spectacular consumption, then, describes the process by which the material and symbolic relations among the culture industry, the life worlds of persons, and the ontological status of cultural forms are transformed in terms generated by public consumption (Watts, 1997).

The successful masking of the fact that the “Whassup?!” guys are “ontologically eroded” as cultural forms (Best & Kellner, 1997, p.102), thus, extends beyond the texts of the ads themselves to a series of related texts that together constitute the on-going production of spectacle. The “aura” of the “True” ads is itself replicated through corporate strategy linking public opinion, corporate discourse, and testimony from the “Whassup?!” guys themselves. Our understanding of “reality” is mediated through a matrix of imagery in the spectacle.

One key dimension of these appeals is the way the “universal” dimensions of the commercials enhance the “aura” of “authenticity” by making explicit claims to “real life.” “Whassup?!” is called a “common guy greeting,” (Farhi, 2000, p.C1) and “Whassup?!” enthusiasts identify how the ads are said to reflect “the essence of what [men] do on Sunday afternoons” (Adande, 2000, p. D1). According to Bob Scarpelli, the creative director of the advertising agency responsible for the campaign, this doing nothing is labeled a “common experience” that “resonate[s]” because men can say, ““That’s me and my buddies.”” Although there is a gender gap with the ads, and men like them more, many women nonetheless chime in by remarking ““That’s my husband, my boyfriend or my brother””

(McCarthy, 2000a, p. 3B). Anheuser-Busch frequently cites marketing research that explains the ads’ “cross-over appeal” in terms of “universal” friendship and “about being with your buddies” (McCarthy, 2000D, p. 6B).

Discussing the fact that the target audience for this campaign was originally composed of “Everymen” (Garfield, 2000a, p. 2), meaning mostly white men, “Whassup?!” ad promoters like Anheuser-Busch V.P. Bob Lachky refer to focus group reviews where “predominately Anglo” crowds report that each of the ads “is a colorless thing. . . .” (Adande, 2000, p. D1). Similarly, after the first of the ads garnered the Cannes top prize, *Advertising Age* explained the accolade by saying that “America saw [the ad] not as an inside-black-culture joke but [as] a universal expression of eloquent male inarticulateness” (Garfield, 2000a, p. 2). The point that we are making here is that these statements posit as *prima facie* evidence for the existence of a color-blind society the fact that white folks *claim* identification with black (mediated) experiences. This claim seems reasonable and perhaps even promising when one understands that it is premised upon the captivating depiction of black male affection and camaraderie among real life friends. Commenting in the *Washington Post*, one observer writes that the ads “provide a glimpse into a private world of four men at leisure. The joy each man expresses in greeting and being greeted by his longtime friends is infectious, universal and, it seems, genuine” (Farhi, 2000, p. C2). This display is important given the fact that television advertising rarely shows black affection (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; hooks, 1992).

In spectacular consumption the linkages among the spheres of social life,

the culture industry, and public consumption allow dynamic discursive and pragmatic interplays of influence; corporate appeals to universalism thus encourage backing from the “Whassup?!” guys as they recount their real life affections for an insatiable media. For example, Charles Stone has repeatedly testified to the ads’ “universal message of male bonding” (McCarthy, 2000B, p. 2B) by describing how the whole thing got started: “That’s really how we talk to each other. We used to call each other on the phone 15 years ago, during our college years, and that was our greeting. People say it seems real to them. It *is* real” (Farhi, 2000, p. C2, emphasis added). “It really wasn’t acting,” remarks Paul Williams, the “Whassup?!” guy with the big hair. “It was us being us” (Adande, 2000, p. 2). Scott Brooks, who plays and is “Dookie” in the ads, agrees: “You can’t fake that kind of chemistry,” he remarked during a promotional tour in St. Louis. “We’re really friends” (McCarthy, 2000d, p. 7B). It is important to acknowledge that these messages arise out of bona fide and caring relationships among the men.

This appeal to a putatively universal experience of male bonding is a conflicted one, however, because it is made through black men in a white dominated culture, wherein the “universal” has long been portrayed in terms of whiteness. Thus, it is the very assertion of the “Whassup?!” crew inhabiting an “authentic” (black) life world that helps warrant the ads’ presumed transcendence of blackness for white viewers. We do not want nor need to become involved in a debate over whether Western humanism actually allows for such transcendence. We mean only to demonstrate that there exists a discursive tension between appeals to color-

lessness and appeals to black cultural distinctiveness. This discursive stress becomes most acute as we explore the contours and shapes of cultural “authenticity.” Anheuser-Busch now boasts that the ads enjoy mass appeal by virtue of their essential colorlessness; it did not, however, begin conceiving of the ads with this virtue in mind. Originally, Anheuser-Busch wanted a “multicultural cast” (Farhi, 2000, p. C1). This sort of marketing strategy has rightly been understood as *color-conscious* because it arises out of a concern that an all-black cast would alienate predominately white audiences (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Jhally, 1995). Additionally, Stone’s argument about casting his friends was assented to by Anheuser-Busch because its ad agency, DDB World Wide, was equally concerned with keeping it “real.” Similarly, early in the campaign’s genesis, Stone thought that the conservative tendencies of the DDB would be placated if he altered the tagline, “True,” to read “Right.” A vice president of Anheuser-Busch asked that he change it back to the more desirable “slang” term saying that “True is cool” (McCarthy, 2000c, p. 9B).

Hence we can see that despite the “universality” of the “Whassup?!” guys life world, Anheuser-Busch and its ad agency paid close attention to how black culture should be shaped for consumption. The many media references to how “Whassup?!” is now the “coolest way to say hello” (McCarthy, 2000d, p. 6B) and the “hip greeting of choice” (McCarthy, 2000c, p. 8B) testify to the fact that African American cultural forms are still the standard bearer of pop cultural fashion. Elijah Anderson argues that the commercials represent something “very specific to black people” (in Farhi, 2000, C3). Similarly,

Michael Dyson believes that they convey the notion that “black vernacular” can be mass marketed without being white washed (in Heller, 2000, p. 11). Indeed, “authentic” blackness is *more* valuable to spectacular consumption than representations of blackness as sameness precisely *because* it is more anxiety producing.

The energy created within the interstices of spectacular consumption arises in part out of the desire for white folk to reconstitute their identities through acts of black consumption (hooks, 1992). To this end, the 1990s seemed to have normalized the market appropriation of black styles. “When they write the history of popular culture in the 20th century,” comments MTV’s Chris Connelly, “they can sum it up in one sentence which is, white kids wanting to be as cool as black kids” (in Graham, 2000, p. D9.) This desire is undeniable, but as hooks so perceptively points out, white folk do not want to *become* black (1992). The discursive spaces of white privilege must be maintained even as the consumption of blackness intensifies. Spectacular consumption as a critical lens brings into focus how the energy from this dialectic is harnessed by the replication of specific features of the “authentic.”

Budweiser ad executives want the funkiness and edginess of the “Whassup?!” campaign to become characteristics associated with Budweiser. The strategy is premised on the logic that Bud is a “colloquial beer” and fits in with the signs of the Other (Farhi, 2000, C2). There are corporate and legal means to enable such identification. For example, Anheuser-Busch has trademarked the term “Whassup?!” for its exclusive market use (McGuire, 2000). Moreover, unlike the African

American life world out of which it comes, where its intonation and its spelling vary among its particular usages, Budweiser has suggested a proper pronunciation for “Whassup?!” and has copyrighted an “official spelling. . . w-h-a-s-s-u-p, although there’s an optional p on the end” (Adande, 2000, p. 2). These technical measures are significant, but they cannot overcome a fundamental problem with consumption. That is, the “image-system of the marketplace reflects our desire and dreams, yet we have only the pleasure of the images to sustain us in our actual experience with goods” (Jhally, 1995, p. 80). This is so if we conceive of Budweiser beer as the good being consumed. This is not the case in spectacular consumption, however, where the “Whassup?!” guys themselves constitute the product. “And no one is better at making a complete, integrated promotional effort than Anheuser-Busch; they’ve gotten every ounce of publicity out of this that can be gotten” (McGuire, 2000, p. E1).

During a 10-day promotional tour during the summer of 2000, Scott Brooks, Paul Williams, and Fred Thomas completed their transformations from product spokespersons to products—the “Whassup?!” guys. Bouncing from one Budweiser-sponsored media event to another, one reporter noted a pattern in the form of a question: “how many times do they estimate that they stick their tongues out in a given promotional day?” (McGuire, 2000, p. E1). This question can be modified and multiplied to illuminate the operations of hyperreality. How often does one have to repeat one’s background and display on cue one’s genuine affection for the other guys to maintain the “aura”? How can such an “aura” even be cultivated through scripted “spontaneity”? How will the

“Whassup?!” guys stay “True” to black expression given the contention made by Russell Rickford of Drexel University that “once a phrase has become mainstream, black folks stop using it and go on to something else”? (McGuire, 2000, p. E1). Although the ad campaign may have already reached its saturation point, spectacular consumption compels the continued replication of value and handsomely rewards its replicants. Charles Stone, III, is now a hot directing commodity who has a movie deal, a contract with Anheuser-Busch for more commercials, and who gets meetings with actors like Dustin Hoffman. There is also a lot of talk about a possible sitcom or movie deal for the friends. At any rate, their “Q-rating,” a TV recognizability quotient, is so high that Brooks, once a bouncer in Philadelphia, was forced to quit his job. Also, Williams, a typically out-of-work actor, has been able to sift through scripts and pay his rent for an entire year (McGuire, 2000, E2).

This media buzz translates into the sort of “talk value” (McCarthy, 2000b, p. 2B) that is partly responsible for convincing the Cannes officials to put aside their misgivings concerning the ads’ popularity in the face of the “Whassup?!” guys’ spectacularity (Garfield, 2000a). In other words, the public consumption of the ads and the actors is constitutive of a commitment to replicating image value. This commitment compels industry brokers like the Cannes folks to shift their values away from rewarding artistic accomplishment in advertising and toward recognizing ads “that work,” ads that sustain spectacular consumption (McCarthy, 2000b, p. 2B). It also helps generate conflicted discursive performances that, through a critical reading of the first “True” ad, further reveal how white

ambivalence helps mold public displays of “authentic” blackness.

“Watching the Game, Having a Bud”: An Exploration of Competing Strategies and Visions of “True” Consumption

The Budweiser “True” commercial offers a setting in which gender and cultural performances are conditioned by sports and spectatorship; “masculinity” and “blackness” emerge as key themes in this world where men lounge in front of televisions and make seemingly inconsequential conversation. Although the repose of these men is casual, even languid, there is quite a bit of action going on. This is so despite the fact that Stone is “laid back” on the couch transfixed by the game on TV; he and his friends appear in this ad as both observers and players of a spectacular “game.” As actors in a commercial the fact that they are being watched cannot be denied, but their performances display a heightened sense of awareness of the politics and character of the white (consumptive) gaze. And so, the ad testifies to competing visions; the “True” commercial demonstrates a form of self-reflexivity that focuses our attention on how the “Whassup?!” guys play a game in which they recognize (that is, see) the ways that their “play” is overvalued as “authentic” cultural performance. The significance of these competing visions comes into view as we integrate a textual analysis with a critical lens that takes into consideration how spectacular consumption is constitutive of images that mediate “real life” social relations. The “True” ad emerges as a conflicted statement on how cultural commodities in the spectacle are made

self-conscious—that is, made aware of how their appearance can maximize their market potential. In order to keep track of all of this seeing and being seen, let's begin with the opening scene.

Charles Stone sets the mood and tone for the first act of this three-part drama. Clutching a beer bottle and stretching out on a sofa he stares vacantly into the lights of a TV; we faintly hear the color commentary of a game. Unlike advertisements where the sports fanatic is caught up in the ecstasy and agony of the sporting event, Stone is nearly catatonic, not invested in the sporting event, but tuned in nevertheless to the ritualistic character of masculine spectatorship. Put simply, Stone seems nearly perfect as the Sunday afternoon “couch potato.”

The telephone rings. Stone, without diverting his gaze, answers the phone: “Hello.”

The camera cuts to Paul Williams who signals for us both a departure from how TV advertising depicts conventional male-bonding rituals oriented around sports spectatorship and an *intensification* of the mood and tone established by Stone. As we have already noted, Williams was not initially considered for his own part in the ad because Stone was told to find actors to make up an ethnic rainbow. Since such a cast would have been “diverse,” the cast would not only collectively signify the ideal of American integration but it would also allow white viewers to “identify with fellow whites, and resonate to their on-screen relationships with each other” (Entman & Rojecki, 2000, p. 167). Williams is, therefore, a violation of this ad strategy precisely because his speech and his look mark him as other in a world of mainstream marketing. Compared to Stone's conservative style, Williams's Afro signi-

fies “exoticism.” On the other hand, Williams wholly identifies with Stone's tone and mood, endorsing a performance that testifies both to the timelessness of the ritual and the character of their relationship. Williams and Stone are watching the same game and having the same beer; their shared interest in the game does not testify to its importance, but rather it reinforces the significance of *being there for one another* during the game. Male bonding transmutes into black male affection as Williams and Stone demonstrate their interpersonal comfort and communal linguistic styles.

Williams: “Ay, who, whassup?”

Stone: “Nothin', B, watchin' the game, havin' a Bud. Whassup wit'chu?”

Williams: “Nothin', watchin' the game, havin' a Bud.”

Stone: “True, true.”

This dialogue punctuates the episode, signaling its end, and announces the following act. Fred Thomas enters the scene and greets Stone exuberantly. “Whassup?!” With flaring nostrils and wagging tongue, Stone mirrors Thomas's performance. Williams asks Stone, “yo, who's that” and Stone directs Thomas to “yo, pick up the phone.” Williams, Thomas, and Stone share a joyful and comical verbal hug that ripples outward and embraces Scott “Dookie” Brooks. Stone's editing creates a visual montage of gleeful faces and a kind of musical tribute to the group expression as each man's voice contributes to a shrilling chorus. As a display of black masculine affection, the scene represents brotherly responsibility. As Williams asks about Thomas and as Thomas wonders “where's Dookie?,” viewers bear witness to black men acknowledging their need and

care for the well-being of other black men.

This mutual affection is nonetheless potentially troubling to white audience members. Ever since the importation of African slaves, black solidarity has been constituted as a threat to white power. Rather than being a detriment to white readings of the commercial, however, this well-spring of angst provides a potent commercial resource, specifically a resource for humor. At the heart of humor is the release of repression, the release of repressed hostility in particular (Gruner, 1997). As a corporate sign of control and regulation, “Whassup?!” thus signifies the comic relief of white angst.

It is precisely the affective display that is historically troubling to white consumption and most subject to being made pleasurable and docile by the operations of spectacular consumption (hooks, 1992; Madhubuti, 1990; West, 1994). During this second act, the greeting balloons into a full-blown caricature of itself and, thus, seems to fit within a tradition of clowning and buffoonery (Franklin, 2000). The “Whassup?!” guys play a role that is, in part, constitutive of white ambivalence toward “true” blackness. Entman and Rojecki (2000) argue that 21st century white attitudes find comfort in imagining racial comity because it affirms American ideals regarding our capacity to all get along. But racial comity can easily be turned into racial hostility if whites are confronted with portrayals of race that challenge the presumption of white privilege or articulate the presence of wide spread racism (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). Since the presumption of white privilege is tacitly maintained through the promotion of black fragmentation (Lusane, 1994; Allen, 1990), black community func-

tions as a menace to white supremacy. And so, illustrations of black communalism are shaped at the outset so that the anxiety and fear aroused in white viewers can supercharge the consumption of black humor or black sex. Thus, the “aura” of “authenticity” that envelops the familial relations among the men functions like lightning in a bottle—a brilliant danger. White spectators have their fears initially triggered by “authentic” blackness, only to have them strategically vented by this self-parody of black community. Attuned in this way, we can now hear the nervous laughter of the *Advertising Age* staff that “doesn’t quite get it but suspects [that is, *hopes*] it is very funny. . .” (Garfield, 2000, p. 4).

This comic display is, therefore, paradoxical. As a “play” in the game, it points to the impossibility of replicating black cultural “authenticity” even as it relies on its presumed aura. It gives the lie to claims of authenticity as the “Whassup?!” guys distort their real life expression—making it “untrue”—for the benefit of the white gaze. Rather than be “real” for a white audience, the “Whassup?!” guys are asked to play a game that is predicated on hyperreality and hyperbolic black acting. Moreover, since Scott Brooks has described the performance as “exaggerated,” this play is understood as such by the “Whassup?!” guys themselves (Heller, 2000, p. 11). But this observation brings up another related insight. If the second act is a self-conscious play during the game of spectacular consumption, the other two acts (the third mirrors the first) can be understood as the “Whassup?!” guys attempt to remain “True.” That is, they are representative of how the friends see themselves and a dramatization of their collective understanding of how one makes the “game” work

for you. Indeed, Stone's script tells us as much.

In the first and third acts, Stone and Williams are concerned with their collective participation in a spectator ritual. The scenes are centered on the black masculine gaze and cool pose (Majors & Billson, 1992). Stone and Williams testify to the fact that they are not just objects under surveillance here, but rather they are engaged in subjective (subversive?) acts of observation and consumption. Specifically, they are "*watching the game, having a Bud.*" In the opening and closing acts of this commercial, the tagline "true" signifies the shared understanding of how to self-promote and shape-shift for the purposes of "having a Bud," of taking advantage of Budweiser's desire for (and fear of) their blackness and in the process, maximizing their own market value. The second act is a festive and troubling demonstration of just such a shared strategy, framed not by individualism, but communalism. The colorful exchange among the friends displays a joy that can still be seen and heard despite the deformations, contortions, and amplifications.

It is true that spectacular consumption *precedes* even the first act and therefore always already makes demands on the "Whassup?!" guys. From this perspective we can appreciate how previously private enclaves and persons can be colonized and transformed into sources for spectacular consumption. We should not be surprised that these operations convert and multiply "Whassup?!" into a series of commercialized signs that perhaps no longer say anything important concerning black culture but are nearly self-referential, standing for little more than their own market value. But the spectacular consumption of the "Whassup?!" guys

brings up yet another concern. White imitation of black life alters the character of social relations among real folks. Not only is the appropriation of black styles profitable, the potential for racial hostility—a function of white ambivalence—is preserved and cultivated by stylish diversions (Kennedy, 2000).

Spectacular consumption functions as a capacitor for such ambivalence, seizing its energies and releasing them in planned microbursts directed at stimulating more consumption. White ambivalence toward blackness is, thus, replicated alongside consumable "blackness." And although this operation nears the character of *simulacra*, we can feel its effects in our everyday real world as black folk are told to "lighten up," or when one's refusal to "play the fool" provokes racial enmity. It may also be the case that "authentic" black affection emerges, however fleetingly, as an expression that is potentially redistributed among a wider circle of friends and communities as "True." But this is a question best left in abeyance until we explore how "real" folks consume these images.

Focus Group Insights: Diverse Perspectives on Similar Themes

Thus far, we have explicated how spectacular consumption provides insight into the commodification of the "Whassup?!" guys and have provided a textual analysis of the original commercial. Throughout these discussions, we have made reference to the various ways that the marketing potential of the commercials seems to be a function of the perceived "authenticity" of the "Whassup?!" guys. Consequently, we facilitated a number of focus group discussions to gain insight into one gen-

eral research question: How are “Whassup?!” ads consumed by different viewers? As can be seen in the following section, accessing divergent perspectives in this manner proved invaluable in strengthening our current critical analysis. In order to gain insight into the various ways that television consumers interacted with the “Whassup?!” commercials, we conducted a series of discussions with undergraduate students at a large, Midwestern university.

Specifically, we drew from one 300-level communication class whose content focused on issues related to race and culture. A total of thirty-seven people were involved in this aspect of our analysis. These persons were diverse in terms of their race-ethnicity (17 African Americans, 11 European Americans, 3 Asian Americans, 3 Hispanic/Latino Americans, and 3 individuals who identify as biracial) and gender (24 women and 13 men). Thirty six of the participants were 18 to 24 years of age.

Our focus group discussions included several steps. First, all thirty-seven participants were shown four of the “Whassup?!” commercials featuring the “Whassup?!” guys in different settings. Participants were then asked to write down their responses to a number of questions, including: what was your initial reaction to these commercials (either now or at an earlier time)?; is the reaction the same for all of the commercials, or do they vary from commercial to commercial?; and who do you think the target audience is for these commercials? Then, two spoofs of the “Whassup?!” commercials featuring “Superheroes” and “Grandmas” were shown. These spoofs were not produced by DDBO or Anheuser-Busch, but we thought they might help give depth to our understanding of audience responses to the advertise-

ments. Again, participants were asked to record how, if at all, their perceptions of these commercials were different than the previous ones viewed. In addition, each person was asked to express their opinions about the apparent marketing strategy behind the series of “Whassup?!” ads.

During a subsequent session, the thirty-seven participants were randomly divided into seven small (5-6 person) groups to discuss their reactions to the commercials. Following these brief 10-minute discussions, a larger 30-minute discussion of all participants was facilitated in order to clarify and extend those insights that were included in the written responses. This larger discussion was unstructured in that participants were simply asked to share some of their perceptions of the commercials as discussed via their individual comments and the small group discussions.

Our thematic analysis of the written and oral comments provided by the focus group participants was guided by three criteria outlined by Owens (1984): repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness. As such, the texts generated via the written comments and larger group discussions were reviewed for preliminary themes. Subsequently, eight preliminary themes were reviewed until a smaller number of core themes emerged that we believe captured the essence of the participants' comments. Through this interpretative reduction process, three specific thematic insights that enhance our critical analysis of the “Whassup?!” guys were identified. Each of these is explicated in the remaining sections of this essay.

Relating To The “Experience”

Almost without exception, the participants found the “Whassup?!” ads to

be highly creative, unique, and entertaining. In fact, bursts of audible laughter filled the room while the commercials were being shown. Initial written descriptions, as well as subsequent group discussions, displayed a general consensus that the “Whassup?!” guys had “hit a comedic nerve” with mass audiences. However, a deeper level of scrutiny in terms of why participants felt the ads were so funny reveals some interesting patterns.

Analysis of written responses provides insight into differences between non-African Americans and African Americans. Nearly every African American woman and man perceived the “Whassup?!” commercials as targeted at young African Americans in general, and young African American males in particular. Several commented specifically on the use of an all-black cast, while others pointed to the ways in which the ads featured “the common language of black men.” Without question, African Americans responded favorably to the ads because of the “authentic” ways in which black culture was represented. The black students tended to conclude that most non-African Americans would not relate to the content of the commercials. One African American explained in no uncertain terms that:

This ad, in particular, is [targeted] at young Black men. The reason [why I say this] is because of the language and the style of the commercial . . . these are not things that a man 35+ would do or phrases that a man 35+ would use. They are things that young Black men do.

What the African American participants did not anticipate, however, were the powerful ways in which non-African Americans also identified with the depiction of the “Whassup?!” guys. For example, only one European Ameri-

can commented on how the ad targeted the African American community:

I’ve never seen these commercials before, but I’ve heard so much about them. I think that Budweiser is trying to appeal to the African American community because it has been known in the past as sort of a “hill-billy, ol’ boy brew.” These commercials bring BUD out of being just a “white man’s beer” . . . Trust me, I used to cocktail waitress—it is!!!

It is significant that out of all of the European, Latino, and Asian American participants she was the *only* non-African American to perceive the “Whassup?!” guys as targeting the black community. Contrary to African American perceptions, nearly all other racial/ethnic group members perceived the ad as representative of male life experiences. Reflecting on our earlier discussion of how “authenticity” functions, it became apparent that non-African American men related to the images of “guys”—not necessarily “Whassup?!” guys—doing “guy things.” One European American man shared that:

[I] had seen the commercials before and found[them] highly comical because I could relate to the experience of having a beer and watching a game with my friends acting silly . . . The target audience of the commercial is clearly men in their early-late twenties.

By and large, non-African Americans focused on the “universal” nature of male bonding and sports. One Asian American male agreed that the target audience was “anyone from the ages of 18-30 who drink beer,” but added, “yes, the ‘what’s up’ guys are all black, but I don’t think that blacks are the target audience because everyone loves those

commercials.” European American women were also quick to point out the lack of cultural specificity in the behaviors of the “Whassup?!” guys. The quotation below is representative of several similar comments.

I had never seen those actual commercials but I had heard about them . . . all of my male friends acted like the men on the video a lot last year. My initial reaction is that it was just a bunch of burly men (weird) . . . Guys always have an inside joke or way of showing off to their buddies.

The contrast between how different racial/ethnic groups perceived the target audience of the “Whassup?!” commercials is of particular significance given Anheuser-Busch’s explicit objective to create a campaign that would be appealing to predominately white audiences. How, then, was it also able to sell the “Whassup?!” guys to African American audiences who yearned for media displays of black culture? The basic principles related to spectacular consumption provide a schemata that makes available answers to this lingering question. As explicated in the next thematic section, we argue that marketing strategists are able, ironically, to negotiate such tensions by emphasizing the cultural “authenticity” of the “Whassup?!” guys.

(Re-)Emphasizing Cultural Authenticity

As stated earlier, responses to the initial “Whassup?!” ads were overwhelmingly positive. However, when participants were asked to comment on their perceptions of two spoof commercials, their reactions were quite varied and significantly different than those based on the initial ads. Specifically, many commented on how the ads “didn’t make sense.” “I really don’t know what the intent of these two com-

mercials were,” shared one biracial woman. Some, but certainly not all, of the African American participants felt that the change in actors reflected a different target audience. This makes sense given that the general consensus was that the initial ads that featured the “Whassup?!” guys were targeted at young African Americans. Many didn’t know how to perceive the spoof ads: “These characters don’t fit the voices. The voices are very African American; the faces on the screen are very WHITE.” However, one African American articulated how the ad did, in fact, continue to target African Americans. She concluded that these two ads “were a cool, creative way to target blacks . . . I still believe the intent is to attract African Americans by subliminally making fun of Whites.”

In comparison, non-African Americans saw these ads as extensions of earlier “Whassup?!” commercials. One European American woman described the spoofs as:

. . . really funny! They are different because you’ve got these “white” people trying to be “black” . . . That’s the perception I got anyway. I also think that that’s why they were so funny—because it was outrageous in that you never should see that.

Another European American woman extended these comments and implicated associations of stereotypical behaviors and subsequently connected them to the perceived target audience:

They are funny because they took two groups: Superhero cartoons and elderly white women who don’t normally talk LOUD and made them do the same dialogue. Neither of the two groups were the target audience: The target audience remained the same.

As had the African American participants, several of these European Ameri-

cans understood how these parodies extended earlier attempts to make use of the “authentic” to attract a large audience. Interestingly, it appears that non-African Americans continue to identify with the “universal” appeal of the “Whassup?!” guys in direct relation to seeing how absurd it could be when “uncool” people try to imitate them. In other words, “we” (those of us who are “cool”) can continue to relate—or even strengthen our relationship—to the “Whassup?!” guys because of the perceived distinction between “us” and those who are spoofed.

Several key ideas emerge as central to the way the spoofs reinforce the original advertisements. First, from the perspective of non-African Americans, the spoof ads appear to strengthen the “universal” appeal of the “Whassup?!” guys; this is accomplished by featuring the absurdity of attempting to reproduce its “aura” with different faces and in different settings. Second, for African American viewers the spoof ads strengthen the “authentic” nature of the “Whassup?!” guys for a very similar reason: the ads hint that white (un-hip) characters can’t “really” imitate black culture. As described earlier, one of the basic tenets associated with spectacular consumption is that the pleasure of consuming otherness is advanced by the Other’s uniqueness. Perhaps these spoof ads help to re-establish the unique nature of the “Whassup?!” guys by parodying attempts to serialize the authentic. This point is best captured in another spoof ad that was never aired but is available at the *adcritic.com* website where it frequently is listed in the top ten. This commercial features a group of young European American friends who attempt to use “Whassup?!” as a means to display their “coolness” at a summer

gathering. Despite their continued efforts, though, they are never able to capture correctly the authentic greeting. Again, this spoof enhances the “Whassup?!” aura by illustrating that the coolness associated with it, and with black culture generally, is virtually impossible to replicate. In this way, the commodity value of the image that is already “owned” increases by virtue of its “uniqueness.”

An Unconsciousness of Commodification

The final questions posed to participants in our focus groups related to their perceptions of the marketing strategies that manufactured the “Whassup?!” ads. Most participants felt that the advertising campaign was highly effective, with African Americans focusing on the inclusion of the black community, and non-African Americans applauding the use of “humor [that could be] enjoyed across racial barriers.” Across racial and ethnic groups, however, several participants questioned what the “Whassup?!” ads had to do with selling beer. One African American woman commented that “the strategy was humorous and attention-getting, but the product could have been emphasized more.” What seemed to be just below the level of consciousness for some participants was the idea that the “product” was not the beer, but the “authenticity” of the “Whassup?!” guys. This critical understanding, however, was not lost on all participants. Several participants discussed the increased exposure that the company got in light of the commercials’ popularity and effective use of humor in associating their product with the “in-crowd.” In fact, one Korean/American woman applauded Anheuser-Bush’s marketing creativity:

Budweiser knows how to capture their audience's attention by using humor. I think [the ads] are effective because they're catchy and people are always talking about their commercials. As to how much beer they sell, I'm not sure because I don't drink; however, I think because people think the commercials are cool, they might think their beer is too.

While some participants made this connection, only one person talked specifically about the historical pattern of the dominant culture co-opting black cultural artifacts for profit. Consequently, comments that focused on the "Whassup?!" guys (e.g., "they are hilarious!!!") were few; more significant attention was paid to the "genius" of Anheuser-Busch. In this regard, it was the corporate marketing team—and not the "Whassup?!" guys—that was given most of the "credit" for the success of the ads. One African American woman, for instance, praised "the folks at BUD [for] using an everyday phrase for some and turn[ing] it into a million dollar commercial." Comments lauding Anheuser-Busch's ability to use humor to market their products were consistent. Interestingly, the "Whassup?!" guys—despite the central role that Charles Stone played in the development of the ads—were seen as pawns strategically deployed by corporate culture. Consistent with the operations of spectacular consumption, the focus groups believed that the "authenticity" of the "Whassup?!" guys was at once "real" and manufactured for mass consumption.

One final point of critical analysis crystallizes the powerful ways in which the "Whassup?!" guys were commodified by mass mediated marketing. Within his written responses, one biracial man (Filipino/European American) described his reaction to the ads

in relation to a previous Budweiser advertising campaign:

I've seen these ["Whassup?!"] ads before. My initial response to these was that they were pretty funny. When I see them now, I still can't help but laugh. These ad wizards at Budweiser out-did themselves this time. I love these guys—a lot better than the frogs. The marketing strategy is GENIUS. I am a Bud man. It is the King of Beers. They've won my vote.

This comment is especially didactic as it unwittingly brings to the surface the paradox of spectacular consumption. The commodification of the "Whassup?!" guys is perceived from the perspective of other Budweiser fabrications. The realization that, philosophically speaking, a fabrication cannot be "authentic" in the way that the focus groups articulated is discouraged by the simultaneous replication of the "aura." This contradiction can be apparently maintained, in part, because "real life" social relations are themselves always already mediated in the spectacle.

Conclusions

Throughout this essay we have argued that the "Whassup?!" ad campaign is constitutive of an ambivalence in the white imagination regarding "authentic" blackness. Idealism concerning racial comity interpenetrates racial pessimism in such a way as to produce discursive tensions within cultural artifacts that seek to sell "race." In the "Whassup?!" campaign, this stress is actualized within the discursive contours of "authenticity." In terms of denoting "universalism" or "sameness," the ad campaign is perceived as delivering a male-bonding ritual with which "everyman" can identify. Conversely, "authenticity" also implicates distinctive black style and culture. The "True"

ads explicitly reference a notion of realism that holds in tension differences associated with how spectators see the “authentic” as either colorless or colorful. Moreover, we contend that the operations of spectacular consumption replicate and amplify this ambivalence because the anxiety inscribed in it enhances the market value of black imagery.

Our focus group analysis demonstrates how white consumers overtly recognize the “universal” character of the “authentic” masculine ritual while tacitly appreciating the ads as (black) ultra-hip. We posit that this cultural dissociation is a sign of how the white imagination appropriates blackness as commodity while denying such appropriation. Blackness here intensifies the pleasure of “eating the other” (hooks 1992, p. 21) and brokers an escalation of the commodity value of the “Whassup?!” guys. Such “pleasure” is a symptom of ambivalence. But also white ambivalence toward “true” blackness forces a *suppression* of the character of such consumption precisely because its conscious recognition would turn the white gaze upon itself. That is, white consumers would be compelled to interrogate the reasons why consuming Otherness as a historically cultivated taste is predicated on white supremacy. Since this sort of public deliberation may reduce the angst white people experience when faced with blackness, spectacular consumption seeks to prefabricate the conditions in which such denial is an effect of public consumption itself. This is why the replication of white ambivalence toward blackness becomes a central facet of these consumptive processes. Endorsing the “universality” of “colorless” male bonding pays tribute to American idealism about race rela-

tions but it cannot (and is not meant to) displace the significance of distinctive black culture. In the white imagination, such a tribute is replicated just as carefully and consumed just as voraciously as the “authentic” blackness that it obscures.

Our textual analysis of the original “Whassup?!” commercial demonstrated how the ad is made up of competing consumptive impulses. Stone’s script is itself a strategic response to the operations through which he and his friends were being commodified. The ad vectors in two directions at once; it satiates and mollifies white desires and fears regarding “real” black brotherhood by turning the greeting into a cartoon version of itself. It also gestures toward a site of cultural integrity beyond the shouts and shrills of the corporate sign of “Whassup?!” In the first and third acts of the commercial, Stone and Williams “have a Bud” and observe how the spectacular game is played. Their subjective and consumptive acts help reshape the conditions of their commodification because they serve as a narrative frame for the second hyperbolic scene. Understood from this perspective, the ad begins and ends with a commentary on how to “keep it real” while playing the “game.”

The game continues. While there have been several interesting “Whassup?!” spin offs, the “True” ad that appeared during the 2001 Superbowl critically dramatizes the problem that spectacular consumption poses for critics who seek to conceive of “reality” and “power” in conventional terms. As a replica of the original commercial, the ad reintroduces us to notions of cultural authenticity and surveillance. This ad, however, features two white

guys and their brown friend and represents the inversion of cultural cool.

The phone rings. "Brett," looking rather stiff while watching TV, answers the phone:

"This is Brett."

"What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing?"

"Just watching the market recap, drinking an import."

"That is correct. That is correct!"

A knowing audience is immediately clued into the fact that this conversation is "lame" and even strange compared to the familiar rhythm of the "Whassup?!" guys. Indeed, the fact that these new friends are drinking imported beer signifies a kind of *foreignness*. "Chad" (who is brown) enters carrying a tennis racket and exclaims "what are you doing?" and "Brett" directs him to "pick up the cordless." The friends exchange their cumbersome greeting with comedic gusto. Despite the fact that the scene is silly, we would like to note some serious implications. Viewers who are knowledgeable about "Whassup?!" cool are encouraged to ridicule the "What are you doing" guys. Although signifying economic privilege, they are marginalized as un-hip (and, perhaps, un-American) "wannabes." Moreover, the "What are you doing" guys seem unaware that their cultural performance is out of fashion. At the end of the commercial, Fred Thomas and Paul Williams are shown having a Bud and watching the "wannabes" on TV. Here, the ad characterizes the black male gaze as central and authoritative as the "Whassup?!" guys look at each other with facial expressions that say, "these guys can't be for real"; their capacity to sit in judgment over the "wannabes" places "authentic" black culture in a position

of cultural commodity privilege. But popular culture dominance is not the only significant issue. While the "Whassup?!" guys are watching their imitators fail, the "What are you doing" guys are keeping an eye on fluctuations in the value of consumer culture in general; they are "watching the market recap."

Such competing visions of "authenticity" and power are provocative; in spectacular consumption, "real" cultural value is produced through both perspectives. An audience familiar with the "Whassup?!" guys can share in their repose even as it identifies with the "What are you doing" guys' focus on capital investment. Critics are encouraged to see that the ad, in part, represents the notion that spectacular consumption itself is cool. After all, as arbiters of good taste the "Whassup?!" guys are transfixed by the other guys' spectacle. Thus, their consumptive habits stand in for ours and culminate in increased market value for "authentic" black culture and any of its manufactured opposites. This process is also paradoxical because it relies on the notion of cultural essentialism (like "true" blackness) even as cultural boundaries become more permeable and lived experiences become more malleable.

But this dialectic brings up the character of white American ambivalence once again. The "Whassup?!" guys' consumptive gaze is energized by representing the "What are you doing" guys as "inauthentic" and "foreign" laughing stocks. In so doing, however, the ad constitutes "authentic" blackness as authoritative and, thus, perpetuates the threat. So, not only does the ad's humor help to alleviate such angst, but the ad seems to mediate this danger by placing the "What are you do-

ing” guys’ economic power over against the cultural allure of the “Whassup?!” guys. The discursive space of white capitalist power (despite the fact that “Chad” is brown) is tacitly maintained by the reproduction of this ambivalence.

The schemata of spectacular consumption not only allows us to explore how image value is manufactured and magnified, but also to perceive how persons and life worlds are transformed in terms of values generated by their public consumption. Hence, the critic is steered away from an overemphasis on forms of autonomy, individual or cultural; such autonomy is not wholly denied, but symbolic forms are understood as constitutive of substances and of relations that are shaped by the character of public consumption. From

this perspective, the culture industry does not dictate forms of consumption; nor does an agent determine her own image; they are both altered by the ways that forms are consumed. The relations among the industry, the life worlds of persons, and cultural forms cannot be adequately understood as characterized by *exchanges* of meaning and value; they are more precisely meaning and value *transfusions*. And so, we contend that the “True” character of the “authentic” in the land of spectacular consumption is neither an ontological given nor a semiotic project. Rather, it is a decentralized and localized achievement based only in part on one’s lived experience, now understood as a function of how ways of life are commodified and consumed.

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