“Now I Ain’t Sayin’ She a Gold Digger”: Wal-Mart Shoppers, Welfare Queens, and Other Gendered Stereotypes of Poor Women in the Big Curriculum of Consumption

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Abstract
In this article, which we present in a format informed by critical performance ethnography/pedagogy, we take up the issue of how we are “taught into” the ideology of consumerism through examining the dominant discourses about (poor) women as shoppers that circulate in popular and political discourses and that work to uphold particular hegemonic ideologies about how to consume and how to behave as consumers within a capitalist economic system. We specifically examine the historical construction of shopping and consumption as “feminine” domains and the consequent negative perception of women as consumers that continues to inform popular discourses about poor women, poor African American women, and women on welfare. We perform a juxtaposed space of academic literature, popular culture representations of female consumers, and interview data from women living in poverty to reconstruct the ways in which dominant discourses about poor women as consumers operate as “controlling images” (Collins, 2000) that perpetuate a “politics of disgust” (Hancock, 2004) that demeans and oppresses poor women. Additionally, we argue that these dominant discourses teach us all the ideology of capitalism, as we learn what is considered “proper” and “improper” economic behavior and use the negative portrayals of women on welfare as foils to justify our own consumptive practices.

Keywords
popular culture, performance pedagogy, consumerism, discourses of shopping, curriculum theory, public pedagogy, gender analysis

[Scene: An open meeting room at the Curriculum and Pedagogy Conference, Decatur, GA, October, 2009. At the front of the room is a long table, where the panelists for this session on consumerism and education are seated. In the middle of the room, rows of chairs are set up for audience members. Jenny, Jennie, and Julie enter and take seats at the table. Jake is outside of the room in the hallway.]

Jenny: Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for joining us for our session. Today, we will be reading our paper about the big curriculum (Schubert, 2010) of consumption and how it perpetuates negative stereotypes of poor women, and of African American women in particular, and also informs our economic ideologies . . .

Jake: (barges in): Yo, ladies. I’m really happy for you . . . Imma let you finish . . . but, Norman Denzin had one of the best methodologies of all time.

Jenny: Okay, Kanye, well I guess we can try it your way, then. Where do we start?

Jake: We move from the personal . . . (gestures to self)

Jenny: To the political? (holds up Obama sign)

Jake: Yes, and from the local . . . (gestures to room)

Jenny: To the historical! (holds up history book)

(Jake shrugs flippantly while the other presenters exchange confused glances.)

Jenny: Okay, Kanye, well I guess we can try it your way, then. Where do we start?

Jake: We move from the personal . . . (gestures to self)

Jenny: To the political? (holds up Obama sign)

Jake: Yes, and from the local . . . (gestures to room)

Jenny: To the historical! (holds up history book)
Jenny: To the cultural! (holds up consumer culture book)
Julie: I got this. (starts music, the instrumental version of Kanye West’s “Gold Digger”)

Soundtrack: (Gold Digger instrumental)
She take my money, when I’m in need
Yeah, she’s a triflin’ friend indeed
Oh, she’s a gold digger, way over town
That digs on me . . .

Julie: (rapping)
Take a look at this, you see four white faces
Caucasians stepping into dangerous spaces
Yeah, we’re all aware of our privileged places
But we can’t ignore this issue: it’s racist!

Now, we’re not rock stars, Theresa Davis,1
So don’t expect Beyonce, ‘cause she won’t save us
We use the words that theory gave us
To question these lessons that teach, enslave us.

Jake: (rapping)
Gendered relations, how did they start?

Jenny: (rapping)
The heart of the home, the domestic part?

Jennie: (rapping)
The private sphere became our spot.
What’s a girl to do? Go out and shop. (all)

Julie: (rapping)
From consumer to flighty, greedy hoarder?
Moral indignation, disgust, disorder?
Academics say it’s disappeared
But look at pop culture, for real, it’s clear.

These stereotypes degrade and disgust
But we also need to know how they teach all of us
They work to uphold capitalist relations
Naturalize and normalize unequal situations. (all)

[Stage Note: During our presentation, we (the authors of this article) took turns reading the various sections of the article below that are in Courier font or that are otherwise unmarked regarding who is “speaking” the part. In this piece we use different fonts to identify divergent sites and sources of discourse around women on welfare. For academic discourses, we use Courier; for Internet blogs we use Comic Sans; for discourses from politicians we use Charcoal CY; for news media discourses, we use Marker Felt; for popular culture discourses such as rap lyrics, we use STENCIL; for quotations from women who were receiving welfare and who were interviewed for a related research project (see Sandlin, 2001, 2003), we use Modern No. 20; and, finally, for discourses relating to marketing or advertising, we use Papyrus.]

As Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997) have so aptly noted, corporate pedagogues have become postmodern society’s most successful teachers. An ongoing concern of ours has been to understand how we learn to be consumers, how to operate within consumer capitalism, and how to accept consumerism as “natural” (Sandlin, 2010; Sandlin & McLaren, 2010; Stearns, Sandlin, & Burdick, 2011). Hoechsmann (2007) posits that although the notion that “consumption is pedagogical” may “fly in the face of much educational discourse” (p. 654), consumption is indeed an important arena of popular culture with important pedagogical and cultural implications that educators must work to understand. While Hoechsmann (2007) focuses specifically on advertising as the way in which we are “taught into” consumerism, we take up a different aspect of consumption’s curriculum: the dominant discourses about women as shoppers that circulate in popular and political discourses and that work to uphold particular hegemonic ideologies about how to consume and how to behave as consumers within a capitalist economic system.

In this article, we examine the historical construction of shopping and consumption as “feminine” domains (Slater, 1997; see also Bocock, 1993; Bowby, 1987, 2001; Scanlon, 2000) and the consequent negative perception of women as consumers that continues to inform popular discourses about poor women, poor African American women, and women on welfare. We perform a juxtaposed space of academic literature, popular culture representations of female consumers, and interview data from women living in poverty to reconstruct the ways in which dominant discourses about poor women as consumers
operate as “controlling images” (Collins, 2000) that perpetuate a “politics of disgust” (Hancock, 2004) that demeans and oppresses poor women. Additionally, we argue that these dominant discourses teach us all the ideology of capitalism, as we learn what is considered “proper” and “improper” economic behavior and use the negative portrayals of women on welfare as foils to justify our own consumptive practices.

We situate our analysis of such negative stereotypes historically, beginning with the “separate spheres” ideology so frequently evidenced in the popular culture of the 19th-century United States. The gendering of masculine and feminine spheres of influence, we show, serves the function of reinforcing the ideological separation of “economic” and “social” conduct that all too often has provided justification for capitalism’s worst features since the construction of such absolute distinctions between commercial and personal transactions inevitably helps support definitions of the market as a realm of pure self-interested competition. Contemporary mainstream economics, as does our culture generally, conventionally regards the domestic sphere as a “‘noneconomic’ domain” (and thus women as “relatively ‘noneconomic creatures’”) and tends to conceptualize “economic interest” in a very limited sense, one that fails to “encompass concepts like cooperation, loyalty, and reciprocity” (Folbre & Hartmann, 1988, p. 185, 197; Nelson, 1993). Furthermore, because the association of consumption with the feminine draws upon notions of caretaking, as women have been crafted as “purchaser consumers” (Cohen, 2003), acting out their duties to family and country through shopping—what Slater refers to as “good domestic management”—it positions women as emotional rather than rational (Jubas, 2008); the stereotype of the materialistic, out-of-control female shopper stands in sharp contrast to the rational, autonomous, calculating “economic man” that emerged in the early 1900s in neoclassical economics and that remains the masculine foil to the flighty female consumer (Sassatelli, 2007). The gendered stereotypes that position women as shoppers and men as producers, we argue, have thus played a crucial role in the ideological construction of “economics” itself.

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Theoretical Interlude

McCracken (1990) defines consumption as “the processes by which consumer goods and services are created, bought, and used” (p. xi). Consumption is a “set of social, cultural, and economic practices” (Bertelsen, 1996, p. 90) that in capitalism is undergirded by the ideology of consumerism, which “serves to legitimate capitalism in the eyes of ordinary people” (Bertelsen, 1996, p. 90). Consumerism can be defined as “the misplaced belief (the myth) that the individual will be gratified by consuming . . . an acceptance of consumption as a way to self-development, self-realization and self-fulfillment” (McGregor, 2001, p. 2). The ideology of consumerism is currently one of the most dominant forces in society (Norris, 2006; Sassatelli, 2007; Spring, 2003). The United States, in particular, is “the most consumer-oriented society in the world” (Schor, 2004, p. 9), as there are more than 46,000 shopping centers in the U.S., a two-thirds increase since 1986. House sizes in the U.S. have increased rapidly, with huge walk-in closets and four-car garages “to store record quantities of stuff” (Schor, 2004, p. 9). We are inundated by advertising that is increasingly “pervasive, insidious, and interactive” (Molnar, Boninger, Wilkinson, & Fogarty, 2010, p. 83)—advertising invades “virtually every social institution and type of public space, from museums and zoos, to college campuses and elementary school classrooms, restaurant bathrooms and menus, at the airport, even in the sky” (Schor, 2004, p. 9).

We argue that it is “essential to address the growing prevalence of consumerism” (Norris, 2006, p. 458), given
consumption and consumerism’s increasing role in structuring every aspect of our lives and in fostering gross social and economic disparities (Bocock, 1993; McLaren, 2005). We thus join other curriculum scholars who are concerned about the increasing power of global corporate hypercapitalism and the imperialism of commercialism that shape the educational messages of popular culture (McLaren, 2005; Reynolds, 2004; Sandlin, 2010; Sandlin & McLaren, 2010). Giroux (2001), for instance, states that we currently live in a world of a hypercapitalism “that monopolizes the educational force of culture as it ruthlessly eliminates those public spheres not governed by the logic of the market” (p. xxix, emphasis in the original). One way of addressing these issues is to explore how we learn to be “good” consumers, to operate within consumer capitalism, and to accept consumerism as natural (Hoechsmann, 2010; Kahn, 2010; Kenway & Bullen, 2010; Sandlin, 2005, 2010; Stearns et al., 2011; Usher, 2010). We take up Hoechsmann’s (2007) broad formulation of educational discourse, which aligns with much of the historical and contemporary trajectory of critical curriculum scholarship that seeks to articulate curriculum and the processes of education in spaces external to, but still implicated with, formal schooling. Beginning with Dewey’s foundational work reframing education as a democratic (1916) and experiential (1938) project and extending to the reclamation of curriculum as a verb (currere) by Pinar and Grumet (1976), contemporary curriculum theorists have frequently expanded their work to incorporate both educational content and the situated ways and places in which this content might be encountered. Cremin (1976) and Schubert (1981) each posited that curriculum inquiry needed to account for the broader forms of education that permeate cultural discourse—the BIG curriculum (see also Schubert, 2006a) of public and private spaces that resides in both liminal and distant proximities to formal schools and schooling. Following this line of thought, we argue that consumption, which is an increasingly intrinsic part of individuals’ everyday life practices and identity formation, must be recognized as an influential element within the BIG curriculum (Reynolds, 2004).

John Dewey, writing in postdepression America, saw the growth of consumerism, what he termed the acquisitive society, as a foil to democracy (see Schubert, 2010). In its most educative guises, “an attitude of acquisition—the capitalistic ethos, if you will—penetrates our being in ways we scarcely realize. It staunchly prevents the kind of education that Dewey proposes as most desirable” (Schubert, 2006b, p. 82). Molnar’s (2005) work on school commercialism extends this point, as he locates Dewey as antipodal to the education first conceptualized by Edward Bernays, the pioneer of utilizing propaganda as a tool within public relations and advertising. Contemporary critical scholars have taken up similar lines of criticism, suggesting that consumptive behavior, “has become the cognitive and moral focus of life, the integrative bond of society” (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997, p. 16). Usher, Bryant, and Johnston argue that contemporary consumer capitalism encourages and requires both consumption and “people who develop their identities through consumption” (p. 16). Given the omnipresence of consumption in our lives, they insist it is impossible to understand curriculum “without a conception of the part played by consumption and consumer culture” (p. 18) and urge educational researchers to take consumption seriously as a site of education and learning.

Similarly, Giroux (2001) argues that educators and parents should critically analyze what it means for citizens to grow up in such a world and calls for educators to develop new tools that can address “how pedagogy, knowledge, resistance, and power can be analyzed within and across a variety of cultural spheres, including, but not limited to, the schools” (Giroux, 2001, p. xxix). We believe our research answers this call and furthers the field’s understanding of how education, learning, and consumption are connected, as it builds upon
Hoechsmann’s (2007) analysis of what he terms the pedagogy of consumption by showing how we are socialized into the ideology of consumption not only by advertising, but also by the dominant discourses positioning poor women as certain “types” of consumers that can be positioned as foils to normalize middle-class consumption. Similarly, by analyzing how these dominant discourses transmit capitalist and consumerist ideology, we illustrate one arena through which the market operates as consumer educator (Martens, 2005) and provide a cultural analysis of how consumption operates as a curriculum text.

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Whereas most analyses of such dominant narratives understandably focus on the damaging effects their “internalization” has on the real women they misrepresent, we aim to also identify the ways such narratives work to support capitalist, consumerist ideologies generally, and thus, the ways they affect us all. Specifically, we argue that the various demonizations of the female shopper in the popular imagination teach us what counts as “proper” economic behavior and thus reinforce our capitalist definition of “economics” itself. These mythic monsters—the white trash Wal-Mart shopper, the gold-digger, the welfare queen—function as crucial lessons in the curriculum of capitalism.

[Stage Note: In the following section, we explain the logistics of the performance to the audience.]

During this performance, we will be handing out to audience members verbatim quotations from song lyrics, academics, Internet bloggers, welfare recipients who were interviewed a few years ago for a related research project, and politicians. When we hand you a piece of paper with text on it, please stand and read it immediately, regardless of whether someone else is speaking. These readings are meant to be interruptive—to simulate the barrage of messages we receive everyday as part of the curriculum of consumption.

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Methodological Interlude

This article is presented in a format located within the broad methodology of critical performance ethnography/pedagogy, which uses theater and public performance to highlight cultural politics to create in both performer and spectator a reflective awareness that has the potential to generate positive social change (Alexander, 2005; Denzin, 2003). To accomplish this, critical performance ethnography/pedagogy centers on action—the “active body doing; the active mind knowing; and an active civic responsibility that collectivizes and promotes democracy and human rights” (Alexander, 2005, p. 426). Performance art is a serious, educative challenge to audience members to become more reflectively aware of the subject of the performance; it is not an entertainment-based medium (Groh, 1981). Performance artists often hope that audience members will change their habitual routines as a result of experiencing the artists’ messages. We believe that the experiences of creating and enacting performance art can bring about new experiences for both ourselves and for audience members because we believe, following Ellsworth (2005) and Duncombe (2002), that as a form of critical public pedagogy, performance ethnography has a pedagogical force that goes beyond what we can create in a traditional academic conference setting.

Denzin (2003) explains that critical performance ethnographies/pedagogies involve researchers enacting stories of oppression and resistance, eventually engaging members of the community to become co-performers in a “drama of social resistance and social critique” (p. 196). In the case of our project, the stories of oppression and resistance focus on the ways in which gender, race, and class intertwine in the deleterious public representations of and discourse
around women on welfare. Through critical ethnographic performances, voice is given, politics are enacted, and people are moved to action. Denzin (2003) further explains that these kinds of performances—what he also calls "political theater"—operate to shape subjects, audiences, and performers. He argues that "these performances interrogate and evaluate specific social, educational, economic, and political processes. This form of praxis can shape a cultural politics of change. It can help to create a progressive and involved citizenship. The performance becomes the vehicle for moving persons, subjects, performers, and audience members into new, critical, political spaces" (Denzin, 2003, p. 198). An important part of critical performance ethnography/pedagogy involves not simply enacting the performance, but also understanding how the performance affects both the performers and the audience members —emotionally, intellectually, and politically (Alexander, 2005). We thus encourage readers to participate in "engaged discourse" (Alexander, 2005, p. 430) with us and welcome feedback on this piece. As we discuss in the epilogue of this article, this reading also was meant to serve a greater political purpose regarding the complicity of academics and academic discourse in the maintenance and reproduction of the very power structures we critique.

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From the beginning of the consumer revolution, shopping and consumption have been historically constructed as "female" domains (Slater, 1997; see also Bocock, 1993; Bowlby, 1987, 2001; Scanlon, 2000). Marketers and popular and political discourses have created and perpetuated gendered stereotypes, positioning women as shoppers and men as producers; in so doing, production has come to be "masculinized and valorized" while consumption has been "feminised" (Belk, 1995, p. 61). At times this feminization of consumption has crafted women in a positive light, positioning them as "purchaser consumers" (Cohen, 2003) who enact their duties to family and country through shopping. At other times it has resulted in women being "denigrated" (Belk, 1995, p. 61) and portrayed as mentally ill, duped by advertising, or reckless.

The association of consumption with the feminine is grounded in capitalism's ideology of the sexual division of labor, which assumes that "society is divided into two separate spheres of home and outside work and that these are women's and men's spheres, respectively" (Fraser, 1989, p. 149; see also Slater, 1997, pp. 56-57). Shopping and consumption became integral parts of the domestic realm—"buying and arranging domestic objects was women's work" (Lubar, 1998, p. 9).

In the midst of these gendered relations of production and consumption, beginning in the mid-19th century in the United States and slightly later in Britain and Germany, women began being urged by a burgeoning advertising industry to "go out and buy" (Bocock, 1993, p. 95); during this same period, department stores, such as the Paris Bon Marché, opened in Europe and in North America. By the 1880s, shopping in department stores—which were decidedly gendered spaces that appealed specifically to women and that were associated with women—had become a popular activity outside of the home "for middle-class women in the main cities of western capitalism" (Bocock, 1993, p. 95). The Paris Bon Marché, for instance, gave away instructions specifically to women, explaining how to reach the store by public transportation (Bocock, 1993). Bowlby (1987) explains how the act of women's venturing outside the home by themselves marked a break with the past and argues that department stores offered women a way to escape the boundary of the home, as department stores were:

the first public places—other than churches or cathedrals—which were considered respectable for her to visit without a male companion. But this also signaled, at another level, a stepping out from domestic bounds. (p. 189)
Popular discourse at the time crafted women as incompetent and unknowledgeable when dealing with the public sphere, so department stores were “safe” public spaces designed specifically for women, to bring “order to the potential chaos of women customers”—department stores “opened ‘the public’ safely to women without threatening men’s public power” (Glennie, 1995, p. 186).

This tension between public and private realms and the desire to portray women as home-centered consumers prevailed during the early 20th century and did not subside when the women’s rights movement resurged in the 1960s and led to an unprecedented increase in the number of women entering the workforce. As Jacobson and Mazur (1995) observe, a study of magazine ads published between 1960 and 1979 revealed that very few ads depicted women in employment outside the home and that women were typically portrayed in traditional gendered roles such as cooking, cleaning, or caring for children. This trend continued in print advertisements throughout the 1980s. Even as women infiltrated corporate America in increasing numbers, Better Homes and Gardens and Family Circle held fast as the top-selling women’s magazines of the decade (Endres & Lueck, 1995). Then, as now, advertisements for perishable goods, home furnishings, and beauty products featured prominently in these home-centered periodicals and reinforced the idea that, in spite of the increased demands of full-time careers, women were still the primary caretakers of and consumers for the domestic sphere.

In the last half of the 20th century, television emerged as a more powerful medium for the expression of dominant social and political values. Although we, as consumers, may tend to think of television largely as an entertainment medium, our savvy corporate pedagogues know that the primary function of television lies in providing audiences for advertisers. As Twitchell (1996) observes, television has become “the social and intellectual glue that holds us together, our ‘core curriculum,’ our duomo” (p. 92). The elements of this “core curriculum” have changed little when it comes to gendered portrayals of consumption. In the 1970s and 1980s, these portrayals were particularly insidious in that they utilized fear to reinforce the woman’s role in the private sphere. The highly memorable echo of “Ring Around the Collar” commercials for Wisk detergent taunted women with the disgrace of laundry stains on their husbands’ work shirts. Cascade dish detergent continued the trend, creating a household epidemic of spotty dishes, while Wizard air freshener employed a similar tactic, squarely saddling on women the blame for home odor, which they termed House-i-tosis. Today, fashions and slogans have changed, but the message that women are ultimately responsible for the private sphere remains largely the same.

This gendering of separate masculine and feminine spheres of influence, we posit, ultimately works to reinforce the ideological separation of “economic” and “social” conduct on which our very conceptualization of capitalism, if not “economics” itself, has come to depend. Treating all forms of exchange as market exchange helped classical economists legitimize the claim that human behavior was universally profit motivated; describing capitalism’s propensity to commodify all aspects of human existence, contemporary cultural theorists have often too hastily accepted conventional economics’ reductive assumptions about exchange (Stearns, 2002). These assumptions, as feminist economists such as Nancy Folbre and Heidi Hartmann (1988) have pointed out, limit our ability to envision alternatives to existing socio-economic structures; if only rational, self-interested market transactions are truly “economic,” then the alternative to the market’s negative aspects would be not only a world without capitalism, but an obviously impossible one without any economic transactions whatsoever.

An important factor contributing to the development of this ideological propensity to regard economic and social activities as polarized is the “separation
of economic necessity from personal relationships" that generally results from the development of a market economy (Carrier, 1995, p. 16). According to Karl Polanyi’s (1944) classic history of the market system, prior to the establishment of a self-regulating market, an “economy” is “embedded in social relations” due to such practices that work “to enmesh the economic system proper in social relationships” (p. 57), whereas in societies with a developed market, “social relations are embedded in the economic system” (p. 52). Polanyi’s formulation of this difference is compelling in that it identifies a distinguishing feature of market societies in terms that are concrete but that do not imply an absolute separation between “social” and “economic” activity. Although in truth, any transaction can simultaneously have both economic and social significance, U.S. culture has since at least the second quarter of the 19th century increasingly regarded economic and social activities as essentially distinct. The subordination of social relations to economic transactions described by Polanyi has commonly been conceptualized as their separation: “as economic transactions become increasingly differentiated from other types of social relationships, the transactions appropriate to each become ever more polarized in terms of their symbolism and ideology” (Parry, 1986, p. 466).

The belief that self-interest rules in the market and altruism at home was a core component of the separate spheres ideology associated with the 19th century; this belief, however, remains a working assumption of many economists, whose models often reflect assumptions that “exaggerate both the atomistic, separative nature of behavior in markets and the connective empathy and altruism with families” (England, 1993, p. 37). Folbre and Hartmann (1988) explain:

Within the neoclassical tradition, the assumption of a joint utility function has obscured the possibility of conflicts between individuals in the family. Within the Marxian tradition, the assumption that class interests are primary has obscured the possibility of conflicts between individuals within the same class. As a result, both paradigms idealized the family, placing very strict limits on the operation of self-interest there. (p. 185)

Consequently, conventional economics, like our culture generally, has been able to construct the domestic sphere and the women on whose work (which in fact include shopping) it has traditionally depended as somehow “noneconomic.” Moreover, conventional economics has thus been able to construct the market and “economic interest” in equally limited terms that make little room for such concepts as social reciprocity and responsibility (Folbre & Hartmann, 1988, pp. 185, 197).

By the mid-19th century, the culture of consumption had become widespread and engrained as part of everyday life in many Western countries; consumption’s association with women was also well established by this point. During this period, popular discourse began to express misogynistic and moralistic views about women as out of control, mentally ill, and suffering from shopping “diseases.” Slater (1997) explains that these fears arose because women, through moving into the public spaces of department stores, were no longer under the patriarchal gaze of the home. Shopping spaces were unregulated, places that stirred up fantasy, desire, and “insatiable need” (p. 76).

[Stage Note: From this point forward until the end of the performance, the authors handed out slips of paper containing excerpts of various texts to audience members. In the performance, when given these slips of paper, audience members stood up and read them immediately. At times their reading overlapped with our own reading of the paper, creating a cacophonous effect. We illustrate this overlapping reading through the use of side-by-side narratives set off within text boxes.]

Audience Member: "Moral panics arose about women, addicted to shopping, abandoning husbands and children. This pathology of desire was medicalized
from mid-century onwards through the notion of ‘kleptomania’, which was unsurprisingly classified as a form of hysteria—a disease of the womb—and therefore as a sexual disorder. Just as in Hogarth’s time, it is feared that the freedom of the money economy leads directly to the madness of lust through the loss of moral regulation” (Slater, 1997, p. 76).

Audience Member: A commentator writing in 1906 in the Australian Worker newspaper demonstrates a similar misogynistic tone: “Women sweating, struggling, swarming round the damaged gloves; snarling, gesticulating over the eighteen-penny muslins. Their fat, bulging, gloating eyes are twinkling with greed. Their hands lovingly fondle the prizes they are losing their self-respect to win. Never once do they pause to realize that someone must go short that their insatiable greed may be satisfied” (Reekie, 1993, as cited in Jackson & Thrift, 1995, p. 222).

In the 1920s, advertisers focused much of their work on the female audience, believing them to be the primary shoppers. Advertisers assumed women were overly emotional and described them in terms of “capriciousness, irrationality, passivity, and conformism” (Marchand, 1986, p. 69). Marchand explains that advertisers “became increasingly committed to a view of ‘consumer citizens’ as an emotional, feminized mass, characterized by mental lethargy, bad taste, and ignorance” (p. 65). These negative stereotypes of women have persisted throughout history; as Slater (1997) argues, the popular conception of “consumer as dupe” was and is typically associated with women. Women have been described in popular culture since the beginning of the 1900s as “whimsical and inconstant, flighty, narcissistic; they can be seduced, or their resistance overcome, by stimuli or persuasion to achieve market penetration” (Slater, 1997, p. 57).

Some argue that this negative stereotype of women as impulsive, out of control shoppers has largely disappeared from academic discourse. Bowbly (2001), for instance, argues that through the 1960s and 1970s consumerism was associated with women, who were seen as “the unresisting victims of manipulative advertising and vulgar, alluring displays,” who wasted too much time shopping. She goes on to argue that since that time, the consumer has “lost her sex”—meaning that the consumer is now viewed as gender neutral—and has come to be seen as “no longer a fool, but the model of modern individuality. . . who. . . demands and gets the deal” (p. 6). Although in academic discourse, perceptions of consumers might have shifted in a more positive, gender-neutral direction, we posit that negative stereotypes of female shoppers as ill, overly materialistic, and flighty are still widely propagated in public discourse and popular culture. This image is alive and well in Sophie Kinsella’s (2001) wildly popular Confessions of a Shopaholic book series, for example. These negative stereotypes are also present in public and political discourses of poor women, poor African American women, and women on welfare.

Audience Member: Don Boys, a former member of the Indiana House of Representatives, stated, “Many Welfare Mamas are, as the old-timers used to say, very ‘fleshy,’ sucking on cigarettes, with booze and soft drinks in the fridge, feeding their faces with fudge as they watch the color TV” (cited in Albelda & Folbre, 1996, p. 16).

Poor female consumers and, in particular, poor African American female consumers rarely get sympathetic treatment in popular discourses. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) presents the concept of “controlling images”—which are stereotypical images of Black women that serve to justify racist, sexist, and classist oppression. We believe this concept of “controlling images” is helpful in understanding how poor women, particularly those who are African American women and/or on welfare, are still plagued by incredibly negative perceptions of their consumption behaviors. Collins explains that “because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite
groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood," through perpetuating negative stereotypical images. These images "are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (p. 69). Some of the "controlling images" of poor African American women that Collins identifies are the "welfare queen," the "Jezebel," and the "gold-digging hoochie."

**Audience Member:** The "welfare queen" stereotype has remained persistent for the past 70 years. This stereotype became widely and wildly popular—and permanently entrenched in the American collective psyche—in the 1980s with Ronald Reagan's (unfounded) proclamations about "welfare queens" who "milked the system."

This stereotype is most often discussed in terms of how it portrays poor African American women as sexually promiscuous and as "using the welfare system." Less often discussed, and what we focus on here, is how this stereotype (and other similar controlling images) perpetuates negative assumptions about poor women's shopping or consumption behavior, and which in turn play a crucial role in how "economics" is constructed. These negative stereotypes portray poor, and poor African American women in particular, as materialistic, gluttonous, lacking self-control, unable to make responsible choices and live on a budget, and ultimately responsible for their own poverty because of poor economic choices and irresponsible consumer behavior. This portrayal serves as a foil that works to support the dominant ideology that there is such a thing as "rational" economic choices and that when "rational," consumption is natural, healthy, and even therapeutic.

**Audience Member:** Christopher J. Priest (2007), a Southern Baptist preacher in Colorado Springs who has an online blog, stated "Every time you abandon your nine year-old kid in front of the tube and let him or her ingest this garbage, you are committing them to a career path more likely to lead to Welfare Queen and Lowlife than Doctor and lawyer" (¶ 6).

One of the most prevalent negative stereotypes concerning the consumption behavior of poor women is that they are **Materialistic.** According to this discourse, poor women, and specifically women on welfare, live lavishly, waste money on unnecessary luxury items, and have insatiable appetites for expensive commodities.

**Audience Member:** "Well, money plays a big part in everybody's life. So money is the backbone of the whole thing. If you ain't got no money, you ain't got nothing. Everybody need that part. But if you ain't got it, you got to deal with what you got. So that's it. . . . I'm not happy with mine, I would like to have more. I'm just dealing with what I got. I'm just happy with what I got." (Sarah, welfare recipient)

Several of the controlling images that Collins (2000) discusses focus on this supposed materialism. For instance, Collins presents the "gold-digging hoochies," who are portrayed in popular discourse as craving material goods and, to satisfy these cravings, as trying to establish "a long-term relationship with a man with money. These gold-digging hoochies often aim to snare a highly paid athlete and can do so by becoming pregnant" (p. 82). Collins also discusses the "Jezebel" or "whore," who is portrayed as a "sly, conniving, manipulative, materialistic, sexually aggressive African-American woman whose appetites are subject to very little self-control" (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001, p. 35) as well as the "welfare queen," who is portrayed as
a “highly materialistic, domineering, and manless working-class Black woman” (p. 80), who “live[s] lavishly” (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001, p. 127). Zucchino (1997) explains that the stereotype of a “welfare queen” is that of a “Cadillac-driving, champagne-sipping, penthouse-living” woman on welfare (p. 13) — however, Zucchino, a journalist, sought out but could not find any real life examples of these so-called welfare queens, thus exposing the myth as false, racist, and oppressive.

Audience Member: “Before handing out food stamps require the recipients to cancel cable/satellite, cellphones, internet service, sell their computer, if they drive a gas guzzler require them to trade it in for a small, fuel efficient car, smoke, drink alcohol-quit, drug test, electronic toys, expensive jewelry, big screen TV-sell. Require them to do everything they can to eliminate the accesses [sic] and when they are living only on the basics then pass out the food stamps. But they have to prove it. That goes for every other social service in this nation. I believe that if you can afford to smoke or drink or watch cable TV then you can afford to buy food.” (Internet blogger commenting on a news story about food stamp usage in North Carolina).

Audience Member: “If someone in your immediate family was committing welfare fraud, would you report them? ... The cash and food stamps are being used to buy liquor and furnish food for the parties the parents are holding and the food stamps are being sold for cash to buy Xbox video games and a big screen television. (The parents of the children recently came to me and asked me to purchase their children school clothes because they had spent all the welfare money on frivolous items for themselves).” (Internet blogger Daliaimama, 2009)

Audience Member: “I pay bills. I bought food to go in the house. I bought clothes. I make sure my bills are paid first... light bills, the phone bills, the life insurance. ... They need to be paid, if you don’t they’ll be turned off.” (Beverly, welfare recipient)

Audience Member: A story in the Washington Post “exposed” “young black ‘welfare pimps’ [who] drive their girls to state offices in limos” and a “group of female welfare recipients who ’lad in leather and shopping network faux pearls,’ spent their days taking taxis from one welfare office to the next, collecting welfare checks under fraudulent names” (Adair, 2000, p. 11).

Because perceptions of poverty are largely racialized, fuel for these stereotypes can also be found in advertising and popular media that targets Black women. As early as the 1970s, the few mainstream commercials that featured Black women were designed to sell nonessential consumer goods. Today, mainstream network commercials featuring African American women in any way are still hard to come by, aside from beauty ads featuring popular icons like Rihanna or Naomi Campbell. Although thousands of commercials from across the decades are easily accessed on the internet via video-sharing sites like YouTube, hours of searching yielded only a few examples of commercials that present African American women in mainstream roles. One example serves to reinforce the “diva” typecast. The 2007 spot for Dunkin Donuts features an African American woman wielding a shovel and dressed for tree planting in old clothes and tennis shoes. As the woman stands on the lawn, the voiceover is heard to say:

Dunkin Donuts knows it’s not easy being a regular, everyday Suburbanite. To prove it, we tried this experiment with supermodel Naomi Campbell.
Naomi, clad in a pink cocktail dress and heels, appears in place of the woman, flipping her hair and sighing provocatively before thrusting her shovel into the ground. As she places her shoe on the shovel to force it into the ground, her heel breaks. Campbell screams and begins to beat the tree with the shovel before throwing her broken shoe into the window, which shatters as she begins kicking the tree. The image then shifts to the suburbanite, contentedly patting the soil around her planted tree, as the voiceover continues:

Made for the regular, everyday folks, new freshly brewed ice tea. America runs on Dunkin.

Here we see two stereotypes juxtaposed, the irrational, impulsive woman and the materialistic Black diva, which seems to suggest two alternatives for African American women: be a diva, or be a drag, content with the small pleasures you can afford. If we agree with Twitchell’s (1996) assertion that advertising is the “core curriculum” that channels our culture, we have to wonder what advertisers are teaching society.

Closely related to the majoritarian stereotype of poor women, poor African American women, and women on welfare as materialistic, are the stereotyped assumptions that these women lack self control, are gluttonous, are unable to make wise and thrifty consumption decisions, are unable to live on a budget, lack middle-class values such as "thrift" and "discipline" (Hancock, 2004, p. 32), and lack any sense of personal responsibility regarding managing (or not managing) their money (Hancock, 2004).

(Although academics such as Bowlby (1987, 2001) have announced the end of the “gendered” shopper and praise the ways in which consumers have come to be viewed within much academic literature as rational and savvy, this analysis of popular and political discourses that make wildly unfounded assumptions about the consumption behaviors of poor women, poor African American women, and women on welfare reveals a starkly different picture. It is clear that these women are the recipients of massive amounts of rage and disgust and remain subject to unfair, demeaning, racist, sexist, and classist perceptions about their supposed consumptive behaviors. This vilification is a far cry from the gendered consumer roles primarily assigned to white, middle-class women, including even the commercial representations of impulsive, irrational shopper or the literary portrayal of shopaholic Becky Bloomwood in Kinsella’s (2001) Confessions of a Shopaholic, and it is vastly different from the kinds of academic accounts of consumers referenced by Bowlby.

In spite of the prevalence of gendered stereotypes of poor women in the public pedagogies of consumption that emerge from popular mass media outlets, researchers who have examined how low-income consumers and consumers belonging to other historically oppressed groups make consumer
decisions (Edin & Lein, 1997; Hancock, 2004; Ozanne, Adkins, & Sandlin, 2005; Sandlin, 2001, 2003; Seccombe, 1999) have outlined how these stereotypes are misleading, false, unfair, racist, sexist, degrading, and overwhelmingly not grounded in fact. Research that has explored how poor consumers navigate the economic worlds around them has determined that they possess a great deal of consumer information, can successfully navigate the consumer world, and make careful decisions about how to spend their limited money (Edin & Lein, 1997; Mogelonsky, 1994; Newton, 1977; Roberts, 1991). These stereotypes, however, employed as controlling images (Collins, 2000), create and reinforce a “politics of disgust” (Hancock, 2004), and ultimately serve to reinforce a hegemonic worldview that blames the poor for their own poverty, ignoring the social structures that create and perpetuate a system that works against those who are not already white and middle class. Despite their lack of grounding in reality, however, such stereotypes continue to flourish in popular, political, and even educational contexts. Additionally, in blaming the poor for their own poverty—that is, in saying that they remain poor because they don’t make rational economic decisions—dominant discourses uphold the idea that the poor could get out of poverty if only they would learn to act a certain (white, middle-class) way. However, we posit that capitalism does not work as well as economists have traditionally assumed because, for one thing, no individual makes purely rational decisions. Our economic conduct in reality always includes social factors (most people might spend more than they should, for instance, because they want to give things to those they love, or because they want to dress in a certain way to fit in with peers or at work). To deny that is to perpetuate the idea that “business is business,” that economics exists in a realm separate from moral and social responsibility.

Although the perceived opposition between home and work has in some respects been diminished by women’s increasing presence in the workplace, the opposition between the “economic” and the “social” remains, in no small part because of the continued construction of consumption as feminine. Contributing significantly to this persisting construction, we contend, are the negative stereotypes that we have outlined above. Such demonized figures as the “welfare queen” and “gold-digging hoochie” identified by Collins (2000), we argue, reinforce the dominant ideology by simultaneously (albeit paradoxically) “proving” the ubiquity of the “economic” self-interest that capitalism presupposes and by normalizing most individuals’ “natural” pursuit of their own materialistic desires by rendering them less exploitative and selfish in comparison. That women on welfare and food stamps are so often depicted as selfish abominations is no accident: our culture’s mythology requires monsters who signify the imaginary, hyperbolic distinctions between our economic and social lives, who, by thus demarcating its boundaries, protect the market from the intrusion of social responsibilities. The need to naturalize that demarcation is largely why consumption and the domestic were feminized in the first place.

Audience Member: “Women on welfare are greedy, lazy Americans that are able to work, but do not choose to.” (Internet blogger Kyle Krantebitter, ¶. 6)

Audience Member: After the 2008 Black Friday stampede that killed a Wal-Mart employee in Valley Stream, NY, an Internet blogger called the women who shopped at Wal-Mart “stupid dirty fat ghetto dwellers.”

Audience Member: “You know, most time when you’re out of a job, you can’t really save a whole lot no way. Because you got bills to pay, you got to pay those bills no matter what job or no job. Cause you got to pay bills, you know what I’m saying? That’s the main thing that I really... as long as I get my bills paid... As long as I get them out of the way, you know, utility
bills, light bills, telephone bills, and everything like that." (Sarah, welfare recipient)

**Audience Member:** "These white trash housewives kill people every year in a blind rage for sales." (Internet blogger)

**Audience Member:** "It would’ve been nice if the store workers all had baseball bats and they can swing at the fat welfare queen ghetto gorillas." (Internet blogger)

**Audience Member:** "[People on welfare] sit on the couch all day eating snack cakes and potato chips, (which they bought with their food stamps), watching soap operas on their 50” plasma TV (that was paid for by their welfare check) and wonder why their ass has ballooned to 500 pounds." (Internet blogger who calls himself "Sick of Welfare")

Audience Member: “Cause most of the time, that’s when my bills, most of them due, right at the first of the month. And I try to, you know, get it out the way. Uhh... insurance, my health insurance—now, it’s at the end of the month, but it’s so close to the first of the month I just pay it then. On my car insurance, it’s just certain times, you know. So I try to save up to have it when it’s time for it to come. So... and then just something to eat. I don’t eat a whole lot. You know, just the basic foods, I don’t eat a whole lot of that. . . But most of the time right now I just spend it on the main things that I really need or like bills and groceries and things, something like that. Whatever I have to do." (Sarah, welfare recipient)

[Stage Note: From this point forward until the end of the performance, everyone in the audience is standing and reading their quotations, all at the same time. The noise becomes overwhelming, as everyone is trying to talk over everyone else.]

**Audience Member:** In a *Seattle Times* article, Washington State Congressman Steve Quigly wrote a piece called “Wean Parents from Dependency,” in which he argues that we should put poor women in group homes where “we could watch the way they spend their money” and “where they could be watched and where their behavior could be modified with constant supervision” (quoted in Adair, 2000, p. 17).

Audience Member: “Whether [the sexualized bitch] ‘fucks men’ for pleasure, drugs, revenge, or money, the sexualized bitch constitutes a modern version of the jezebel, repackaged for contemporary mass media” (Patricia Hill Collins, p. 127).

Audience Member: bell hooks (1994) asserts that “Mainstream white culture is not concerned about black male sexism and misogyny, particularly when it is unleashed against black women and children. It is concerned when young white consumers utilize black popular culture to disrupt bourgeois values” (p.1).

Audience Member: In Hancock’s (2004) content analysis of mainstream news media and the congressional record, in which she examined how news media and politicians portrayed and discussed welfare, the idea of “personal responsibility for one’s predicament” (Hancock, 2004, p. 181)—that is, the notion that “welfare mothers did not deserve government assistance, largely because they were responsible for their own poverty” (Hancock, 2004, p. 55)—arose repeatedly and consistently.

AudiENCE MEMBER: “KEEP YOUR MIND ON YOUR MONEY/ENROLL IN SCHOOL/AND AS THE YEARS PASS BY/YOU CAN SHOW THEM FOOLS.”

(TUPAC SHAKUR, “WONDER WHY THEY CALL U BITCH”)
AUDIENCE MEMBER:

18 YEARS, 18 YEARS

SHE GOT ONE OF YO’ KIDS, GOT YOU FOR 18 YEARS

I KNOW SOMEBODY PAYIN’ CHILD SUPPORT FOR ONE OF HIS KIDS

HIS BABY MOMMA’S CAR CRIB IS BIGGER THAN HIS

YOU WILL SEE HIM ON TV, ANY GIVEN

WIN THE SUPERBOWL AND DRIVE OFF IN A HYUNDAI

SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO BUY YA SHORTY TYCO WITH YA MONEY

SHE WENT TO THE DOCTOR GOT LIPO WITH YA MONEY

SHE WALKIN’ AROUND LOOKIN’ LIKE MICHAEL WITH YA MONEY

SHOULDA’ GOT THAT INSURED, GEICO FOR YA MONEEEY (YOUR MONEY)

IF YOU AIN’T NO PUNK HOLLA’ WE WANT PRE-NUP

(KANYE WEST, “GOLD DIGGER”)

Epilogue

This paper-as-performance is an attempt to (re)present our situation as scholars, theorists, and writers working with/in the complexity and ubiquity of the “big curriculum” of consumerism (Schubert, 1981, 2006a). The cacophony we deliberately incite(d) via the simultaneous readings recalls the sensation, both intellectually and affectively, of sifting through the imbricated, interwoven, and frequently contradictory discourse and cultural artifacts that comprise our “data.” In a sense, the braiding of consumerism and culture is all but impossible to disentangle in analysis, for, as Giroux (as cited in Weiner, 2007) has noted, it is far easier to imagine the end of the world than the cessation of the capitalist social order. Our findings frequently became disquiet(ing), as the sheer hatred and dehumanization of these women grew louder, more vehement, and more entrenched as we excavated further. At the conclusion of our performance, with the entire audience speaking at once, we interspersed quotes from the interviews Jenny conducted with women on welfare against the monolith of public and popular speech that has successfully invalidated these women’s phenomenological narratives and engendered a cultural climate that all-but ensures their continued domination. Against this din, these women’s voices became/became completely eradicated as their lives are supplanted by the perceptions and fantasies of privilege.

Furthermore, our use of audience members’ voices as the medium for our findings, and our joining of that audience throughout the presentation, attempts to (re)present the widespread complicity shared by members of a capitalist order in producing the conditions that breed resentment toward these women. More importantly, however, it illustrates our own dubious role as academics who, via our research, consume these Others for personal and professional gain. Postmodern sociologist Stephen Pfohl (1992) has called the consumptive relationship one of parasitism, noting that

surrogate victims appear before the eyes/“I”s of those (of us) who sacrifice them as no-thing but objects for logical contemplation and mastery. The measured skull of the prisoner, the opaque and racist image of the Arab, the nude female figure pinned upon the wall—surrogate victims are (literally) sentenced to the sphere of categorically dead matters. As objects, they are paradoxically dined upon by “we” whose gaze they fascinate. (p. 139)
The figurations that Pfohl provides recall the historical origins of inquiry and education, origins that include the abject inhumanity of displacing, imprisoning, and studying Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus (see Willinsky, 1999), another Black body turned spectacle and ultimately dissected for the pur-view and consumptive pleasure of a white audience. Within the didactic, distantiated voice and position of some forms of critical inquiry, the body and narrative of the Other is similarly dissected, renamed and refigured for an academic audience who readily ingests these lives.

We offer this article and performance as a nascent example of our own attempts to contest the hegemonies of the parasitic intellectual within critical research and as a suggestion for other researchers interested in the struggles of underrepresented and underprivileged individuals to explore their own use of alterity as a means of reifying the status of the elite. Wolfe (1999, p. 2), quoted in Tuck (2011), claims that “invasion is a structure not an event” (pp. 34-35), suggesting that the effects of colonialism cannot be located in an historical moment, but rather in historicized modes of being and thinking. This point is well founded in our own observations of the social space of women on welfare, as well as our own reflections on our role in describing these individuals’ plight. It is our hope herein that we, and other researchers working within the same genres, can understand and assume the responsibility of this role, and in doing so, shed light on the problematic role of the academy as the site of knowledge production.

Notes
1. Theresa Davis is a poet based in Atlanta, Georgia. Davis calls herself “Rock Star Poet” and performed at the Curriculum and Pedagogy Conference in 2008 and 2009.
2. We find it somewhat problematic that Bowlby equates “rational” with “good,” as we see this equation as part of the problem with mainstream economic theory: the assumption that “economic” conduct = rational self-interest. This allows economists to simply ignore conduct that does not fit this definition, such as gift exchange and many other practices related to consumption in the domestic sphere (Stearns, 2002).

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Bios

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