

Copyright © 2006 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi) 1468-7968
Vol 6(3): 297-317; 068322
DOI:10.1177/1468796806068322
<http://etn.sagepub.com>

New commodities, new consumers

Selling blackness in a global marketplace

PATRICIA HILL COLLINS

University of Maryland, USA

ABSTRACT Because current literature on globalization largely neglects racism, it fails to explain the experiences of contemporary African American youth within the new racialized social class formations of globalization. I suggest that because African American youth live within the borders of the sole remaining world superpower, their experiences might shed light on social class relations of advanced capitalism as refracted through the lens of race, gender, age and sexuality. First, I investigate how shifting the focus of class analysis from production to consumption sheds light on how African American youth participate in a reconfigured black body politics that is increasingly aligned with the ever expanding consumer markets of advanced capitalism. Second, I use the sex work industry as a template for examining how young African American women and men participate in new forms of commodification that sell blackness in the global marketplace.

KEYWORDS African Americans ● body ● capitalism ● commodification ● consumerism ● globalization ● hip hop ● racism ● social class ● youth

It's just me against the world, baby, me against the world.

I got nothin' to lose – it's just me against the world. (Tupac Shakur)

In the eyes of many Americans, African American youth such as hip hop legend Tupac Shakur constitute a threatening and unwanted population. No longer needed for cheap, unskilled labor in fields and factories, poor and working-class black youth find few job opportunities in the large, urban metropolitan areas where most now reside. Legal and undocumented immigrants now do the dirty work in the hotels, laundries, restaurants and construction sites of a growing service economy. Warehoused in inner city ghettos that now comprise the new unit of racial segregation, poor black youth face declining opportunities and an increasingly punitive social

welfare state. Because African American youth possess citizenship rights, social welfare programs legally can no longer operate in racially discriminatory ways. Yet, rather than providing African American youth with educational opportunities, elites chose instead to attack the social welfare state that ensured benefits for everyone. Fiscal conservatives have cut funding for public schools, public housing, public health clinics, and public transportation that would enable poor and working-class black youth to get to burgeoning jobs in the suburbs. Hiding behind a rhetoric of color-blindness, elites claim that these policies lack racial intentionality (Guinier and Torres, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Yet when it comes to who is affected by these policies, African American youth constitute a sizable segment of the 'truly disadvantaged' (Wilson, 1987). No wonder Tupac Shakur laments, 'It's just me against the world, baby, me against the world. I got nothin' to lose – it's just me against the world'.

Philosopher Cornel West posits that this attitude of 'having nothing to lose' reflects a growing sense of nihilism among urban black American youth and argues that this form of hopelessness constitutes a greater danger to African Americans than that faced by any previous generation (West, 1993). But are African American youth as nihilistic as West suggests? In her study of pregnant, low-income black adolescent girls, sociologist Wendy Luttrell finds only optimism. Luttrell's subjects were fully aware of how society looked down upon them and, in response, saw their unborn children as sources of hope. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley also presents a less fatalistic view. Tracing the history of how black male youth in postindustrial Los Angeles used gangsta rap to criticize police brutality, Kelley suggests that African American youth negotiated new strategies for grappling with the contradictions of a declining economy (Kelley, 1994: 183–227). Recognizing that black culture was a marketable commodity, they put it up for sale, selling an essentialized black culture that white youth could emulate yet never own. Their message was clear – 'the world may be against us, but we are here and we intend to get paid'.

With few exceptions, current literature on globalization fails to explain the experiences of contemporary African American youth with the new racialized social class formations of globalization.¹ Instead, African American youth are often conceptualized as a marginalized, powerless and passive population within macroeconomic policies of globalization. They serve as examples of an economic analysis that only rarely examines intersections of class and race. In contrast, I suggest that because African American youth are in the belly of the beast of the sole remaining world superpower, they present an important local location for examining new configurations of social class that is refracted through the lens of race, gender, age and sexuality. Stated differently, because they are centrally located within the United States, Black American youth constitute one important population of social actors who negotiate the contradictions of a

racialized globalization as well as the new social class relations that characterize it.

This article asks, what might the placement of poor and working-class African American youth in the global political economy, both as recipients of social outcomes of globalization as well as social agents who respond to those outcomes, tell us about the new racialized class formations of globalization? Conversely, what light might the experiences of poor and working-class African American women and men shed on new global forms of racism? These are very large questions, and I briefly explore them by sketching out a two-part argument. First, I investigate how ideas of consumption, commodification and control situate black youth within a global political economy. I suggest that shifting the focus of class analysis from production to consumption provides a better understanding of black youth. Second, I develop a framework for understanding the commodification of black bodies that ties this process more closely to social class relations. In particular, I use the status of African American youth to explore how the literal and figurative commodification of blackness fosters new strategies of control. I examine the sex work industry, to illustrate the interconnections among consumption, commodification and control. I conclude the article with a brief discussion of the implications of my arguments.

NEW COMMODITIES: ADVANCED CAPITALISM AND BLACK BODY POLITICS

Because contemporary theories of social class emphasize production, they do not adequately address the realities of poor and working-class African American youth within the global capitalist political economy. Within American sociology, most approaches to African American social class structures focus on jobs, labor market placement and wage inequalities. For example, in his excellent analysis of the increasing intersection of ghetto and prison within contemporary African American civil society, Loïc Wacquant identifies four peculiar racial institutions (slavery, Jim Crow, ghetto, the hyperghetto and prison) and uses the form of labor required by each historical formation to develop his argument about the core of the economy and dominant social type (Wacquant, 2001: 98–103). Similarly, William Julius Wilson's important work on contemporary black urban poverty sees the absence of good-paying jobs as the major problem facing black youth (Wilson, 1987, 1996). Wacquant and Wilson point to labor markets and unemployment to explain the poverty status of poor and working-class black youth, thus illustrating the contributions of focusing on production.

When it comes to grappling with the contradictions faced by poor and working-class African American youth, the persisting emphasis on production is necessary yet insufficient. Because work has disappeared, many African American urban neighborhoods provide few jobs for adults, let alone teenagers (Wilson, 1996). Moreover, because their neighborhood public schools do not prepare them for good jobs, African American youth cannot compete for them. This large and seemingly intractable population of inner city black youth who lack legitimate access to legal means of production constitute a political conundrum for American policy makers. Because non-incarcerated African American youth possess citizenship rights, employers can no longer compel them to work for no pay or for very low pay. Many poor and working-class black youth do work low-paid jobs in McDonald's, Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken and other fast food establishments, yet these are the jobs with no benefits and no future. At the same time, because many young black men in particular have prison records, employers will not hire them. Their income comes less through production, the steady albeit poorly paid jobs held by their parents and grandparents, and more through other means. Employment in the drug industry, continued dependence on people with income (parents, girlfriends, and/or the welfare state), as well as exploitation of one another (pimping) constitute important sources of income. When it comes to the status of poor and working-class black American youth, especially those who are unskilled and unemployed, highlighting jobs and studying social class relations primarily at the site of production misreads how black American youth participate in social class relations.

Complementing the traditional focus on production with greater attention to the growing significance of consumption within global capitalism provides new directions for understanding the experiences of African American youth. Black American youth are far from marginalized within a massive global black culture industry that uses their images to sell a wide array of products. Moreover, black American youth also constitute a consumer market of their own who will purchase music, alcohol, drugs, cell phones, gym shoes, their own images and other products that are created specifically for them. African American youth are not marginalized but rather remain essential to new consumer markets, both as suppliers of commodities that are bought and sold, and as reliable consumer markets.

African American youth are a hot commodity in the contemporary global marketplace and global media. Their images have catalyzed new consumer markets for products and services. The music of hip hop culture, for example, follows its rhythm and blues predecessor as a so-called crossover genre that is very popular with whites and other cultural groups across the globe. Circulated through film, television, and music, news and advertising, mass media constructs and sells a commodified black culture from ideas about class, gender and age. Through a wide array of genres

ranging from talk shows to feature length films, television situation comedies to CDs, video rentals to cable television, the images produced and circulated within this area all aim to entertain and amuse a highly segmented consumer market. This market is increasingly global and subject to the contradictions of global marketplace phenomena.²

One implication of the significance of consumption for understanding social class relations of black youth concerns the constant need to stimulate consumer markets. Contemporary capitalism relies not just on cutting the costs attached to production, but also on stimulating consumer demand. Just as sustaining relations of production requires a steady supply of people to do the work, sustaining relations of consumption needs ever-expanding consumer markets. Moreover, just as people do not naturally work and must be encouraged or compelled to do so, people do not engage in excess consumption without prompting. In this context, advertising constitutes an important site that creates demand for commodities of all sorts. Marketing and advertising often create demand for things that formerly were not seen as commodities, for example, the rapid growth of the bottled water industry, as well as for intangible entities that seem difficult to commodify. In this regard, the rapid growth of mass media and new informational technologies has catalyzed a demand for black culture as a commodity.

As the black culture industry recognizes, most market demand for products and services stems not from needs but rather from unmet desires that must be constantly stimulated. In this context, physical addictions create ideal consumers who are willing to assume debt to pay for their addictions. If consumers become addicted to tobacco, alcohol, drugs or similar products, despite health risks, they can be counted on to consume. As the repetitive behavior of shopping addicts suggests, the ideal consumer is one who is addicted to consumption itself, never mind the actual product or service consumed. In this context, the interconnections among the marketing of black culture, addictive behavior of consumers who buy its products, and any consumer debt that ensues are tightly linked.³

Under this ever-expanding impetus to create new consumer markets, nothing is exempt from commodification and sale, including the pain that African American youth experience with poverty and powerlessness. Nowhere is this more evident than in the contradictions of rap. As Cornel West points out, 'the irony in our present moment is that just as young black men are murdered, maimed and imprisoned in record numbers, their styles have become disproportionately influential in shaping popular culture' (West, 1993). In this context, rap becomes the only place where black youth have public voice, yet it is a public voice that is commodified and contained by what hip hop producers think will sell. Despite these marketplace limitations, rap remains a potential site of contestation, a place where African American youth can rebel against the police brutality, lack of jobs, and other social issues that confront them (Kelley, 1994). Thus, work on the

black culture industry illustrates how images of black culture function to catalyze consumption.

The actual bodies of young African Americans may also be commodified as part of a new black body politics. Here, the literature on gender and globalization, especially the sex industry, is helpful in understanding how a new black body politics might operate within relations of consumption. Situating feminist analyses of body politics within relations of production and consumption that characterize contemporary globalization provides new avenues for understanding commodification and the emergence of a new black body politics.⁴ For Marx, all workers under capitalism are alienated; they are objectified as they sell their labor power to employers for a wage in order to survive. For women, especially those in racial/ethnic groups as well as in industrializing and developing countries alike, good jobs are more difficult to find. Under these circumstances, some women do not sell their bodily labor to produce a commodity. Instead, their bodies become commodities. In a global context, as newly industrializing countries struggle to find commodity niches in the global economy, they frequently find the best niches taken. Consequently, in some countries sex tourism becomes a significant market fostering national economic development and international capital accumulation (Wonders and Michalowski, 2001).

This new gender scholarship offers a new framework for analyzing a new black body politics that African American youth confront under conditions of globalization. In the United States, African Americans also find the good jobs taken and confront a similar issue of the pressures to commodify their bodies, especially if those bodies are young. More importantly, this impetus to commodify black bodies is not new. Chattel slavery in the American South prior to and during the formation of the American nation state clearly treated the bodies of people of African descent as commodities. Objectifying black bodies enabled slave traders and slave owners to turn black people's bodies into commodities. Slavers assigned monetary value to black people's bodies, and then traded black bodies as commodities on the open market.

Some scholars on race have taken a closer look at how the institution of chattel slavery accomplished this process of objectification, commodification and exploitation. Literary critic Hortense Spillers suggests that relations of slavery and colonialism transformed understandings of black people's bodies. Spillers identifies how 'captive bodies', namely, the bodies of enslaved Africans, were severed from their agency, a use of violence that eliminated gender: 'Their New World, Diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body* – a willful and violent . . . severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire' (Spillers, 2000: 160). This theft of the body severed it from its own agency and thus formed the moment of objectification. Spillers suggests that this new objectified body became a canvas for racist discourse: 'These indecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of

hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color' (Spillers, 2000: 61). Once objectified and marked in this fashion, slave owners and slave traders treated black bodies as commodities that can be traded, bought and sold on the open market.

The treatment of actual bodies as objects and subsequently as commodities within consumer markets as opposed to the appropriation of the labor power that bodies contain may be a more fundamental element of contemporary capitalist economies than is commonly recognized. French sociological theorist Colette Guillaumin lays the foundation for a different kind of historical materialist analysis that rests on body politics (Guillaumin, 1995). Like traditional social class analysis, Guillaumin focuses both on the economy (the exploitative dimension of appropriation for various social systems such as slavery and social institutions such as marriage), and on questions of power and domination. However, Guillaumin's materialist analysis differs from traditional functionalist and/or Marxist analyses of stratification/class. In contrast to traditional social class analyses that begin with the sale of labor power within capitalist relations, Guillaumin's materialist framework originates in the appropriation of the body that contains the labor power itself. Because no form of measuring the value of labor in isolation from the body itself exists, Guillaumin contends that racism and sexism both draw upon this physical appropriation of bodies. Guillaumin identifies slavery as the fundamental historical relationship that fostered modern understandings of ideologies of race. Enslaving African bodies constituted the original theft – the stealing of labor came later. Racial ideologies explaining this process emerged after slavery was in effect. Guillaumin's theory of the sexual oppression of women (her analysis of *sexage*) follows a similar logic. For Guillaumin, the seizure of women's time, claiming the products of their bodies such as children, mandating that women use their bodies to fulfill a sexual obligation, requiring that women's bodies provide physical care for children, the elderly, the sick as well as healthy men, all illustrate how men as a class feel that they can appropriate the bodies of women as a class. Guillaumin points out that people only publicly take that which they feel already belongs to them, as is the case of the public harassment of women in the workplace and on the street.

Guillaumin provides a provocative piece of the puzzle for constructing an argument concerning the commodification of the actual bodies as well as representations of the bodies of African American youth within contemporary global capitalist economies. New forms of commodification within the constant pressure to expand consumer markets catalyze a new black body politics where social class relations rest not solely on exploiting labor power and/or mystifying exploitation through images, but also on the appropriation of bodies themselves. Whereas young black bodies were formerly valued for their labor power, under advanced capitalism, their utility lies elsewhere.

Because bodies are not simply raced but also gendered, this new black body politics takes gender-specific forms. In particular, beginning in the 1980s, the bodies of young black men became increasingly appropriated by the prison system. Typically, these alarming rates of incarceration have been interpreted as central to new mechanisms of social control (Collins, 2004: 215–46). The discipline of young African American men that lands so many in prison seems woven into the fabric of everyday life. Within large urban areas, gangs, ghettos, public schools, public housing and prison work together in a quasi-seamless fashion. Prisons and ghettos gain meaning from one another and both shape new racial formations within American society (Wacquant, 2001). On one level, the growth of the punishment industry constitutes an effective political response to this puzzle of idleness among young black men as well as an effective mechanism for curtailing their citizenship rights. If there are no jobs, one can hardly make them go to them. Racial profiling and locking up men seemed designed to discipline them into not challenging a system that treated them as throwaways. The issue of felon disenfranchisement speaks to this need to discipline black men through the prison system. In the early 2000s, 48 states in the United States had felon disenfranchisement laws. Under felon disenfranchisement laws, criminal offenders typically forfeit voting rights as a collateral consequence of their felony convictions. These laws appear to be race neutral, yet because young black men are disproportionately incarcerated, these laws have a racially disparate impact on this group. In a comprehensive study of these laws, Behrens and Ugger conclude:

our key finding can be summarized concisely and forcefully: the racial composition of state prisons is firmly associated with the adoption of state felon disenfranchisement laws. States with greater nonwhite prison populations have been more likely to ban convicted felons from voting than states with proportionately fewer nonwhites in the criminal justice system. (Behrens and Ugger, 2003: 596)

Yet the growth of the punishment industry also illustrates how black male bodies are objectified, commodified and incorporated in service to maintaining prisons as consumer markets. In essence, Black men's commodified bodies become used as raw materials for the growing prison industry. It is very simple – no prisoners, means no jobs for all of the ancillary industries that service this growth industry. Because prisons express little interest in rehabilitating prisoners, they need a steady supply of bodies. The focus is less on appropriating the labor of incarcerated black men (although this does happen) than in finding profitable uses for their bodies while the state absorbs the costs of incarceration. If Kentucky Fried Chicken found chickens in short supply, they would close and their profitability would shrink. The Kentucky Fried Chicken Corporation has little interest in extracting labor from its chickens or in coaxing them to change

their ways. Rather, the corporation needs a constant supply of cheap, virtually identical chickens to ensure that their business will remain profitable. In this way, prisons made use of the bodies of unemployed, unskilled young black men, the virtually indistinguishable young black men who populate corners of American cities.

The vast majority of young black people who are incarcerated by the punishment industry are male, yet it is important to remember that disproportionately high numbers of young black women are also incarcerated and thus are subject to this form of commodification. Moreover, young black women may also encounter an additional bodily commodification of their sexuality. The majority of sex workers may be female, obscuring the minority of males who also perform sex work as well as the objectification and commodification of black male bodies within mass media as an important component of the sex work industry. In essence, the bodies and images of young African Americans constitute new commodities that are central to global relations of consumption, not marginalized within them.

NEW CONSUMERS: SEX WORK AND HIP HOP CAPITALISM

Here, I want to take a closer look at this process by exploring how sexuality has grown in importance in the commodification of the bodies and images of black American youth and how this sex work in turn articulates with black agency in responding to advanced capitalism. In essence, black youth are now caught up in a burgeoning sex work industry, one that is far broader than commercial sex work as depicted in the media. Young African Americans participate in the sex work industry, not primarily as commercial workers as is popularly imagined, but rather, as representations of commodified black sexuality as well as potential new consumer markets eager to consume their own images.

Racialized images of pimps and prostitutes may be the commercial sex workers who are most visible in the relations of production, yet the industry itself is much broader.⁵ A broader definition of sex work suggests how the sex work industry has been a crucial part of the expansion of consumer markets.⁶ The sex work industry encompasses a set of social practices, many of which may not immediately be recognizable as sex work, as well as a constellation of representations that create demand for sexual services, attach value to such services, identify sexual commodities with race, gender and age-specific individuals, and rules that regulate this increasingly important consumer market. Feminists argue that class, race, ethnicity, age and citizenship categories work to position women differently within the global sex work industry.⁷ By far, international trafficking of women and girls for purposes of prostitution has received the lion's share of attention. Here,

race, ethnicity and age shape the commodification of women's bodies to determine the value placed on categories of sex workers. The discussions of global prostitution and trafficking of women highlight the exploitation of large numbers of women, yet it is difficult to locate young African American women and the sex work of young black men within this literature. In particular, women who are not engaged in visible sex work or who do not show up on crime statistics on sex workers are often considered outside the realm of sex work.

Here, I want to pursue a different argument, namely, the case that sex work is permeating the very fabric of African American communities in ways that resemble how sex work has changed the societies of developing countries. In essence, poor and working-class African American youth increasingly encounter few opportunities for jobs in urban neighborhoods while the mass marketing of sexuality permeates consumer markets. In this sense, their situation resembles that of black youth globally who confront similar pressures in response to globalization. At the same time, the situation of African American youth is unique in that the sexualized images that they encounter are of themselves. In essence, their own bodies often serve as symbols of this sexualized culture, placing African American youth in the peculiar position claiming and rejecting themselves. How might this happen?

From the Bahamas to Cuba, Caribbean societies that depend heavily on tourism recognize how important sex work can be for local economies (Alexander, 1997). These societies recognize how sex work has been reconfigured within their domestic borders, especially following the Structural Adjustment Policies of the 1980s (Emeagwali, 1995). Building on this literature, I investigate how reconfiguration of the sex work industry within the United States has shaped the domestic relations within African American communities generally and for poor and working-class African American youth in particular.

Nigeria, the most populous nation state on the African continent, provides an important case for building such an analysis. Reporting on patterns of trafficking in Italy, Eshohe Aghatise describes differential mechanisms used to traffic women from Eastern Europe and Nigeria as well as the differential value placed on women within Italian sex markets. The trafficking of Nigerian women and young girls into Italy for prostitution began in the 1980s in response to Nigeria's economic problems caused by structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Emeagwali, 1995). As Aghatise points out:

women and girls started leaving Nigeria for Europe on promises of fantastic well-paying jobs to be obtained in factories, offices, and farms. They arrived in Italy only to find themselves lured into prostitution and sold into sexual slavery to pay off debts, which they were told they incurred in being 'helped' to come to Europe. (Aghatise, 2004: 1129)

Most Nigerian victims of trafficking are illiterate and lacked any exposure to urban life.

The shifting patterns of economic and social change within Nigerian society also contributed to the patterns of trafficking. Traffickers preyed not only on the poverty of Nigerian victims, but also on the breakdown of social and cultural values within Nigerian society, in particular, the disintegration of family structures and a weak social welfare state. For many families, sending female children abroad became a status symbol:

Subscribing to a consumerist model that is widely publicized on television and in magazines with messages of high living in the West, and in the oral reports of 'been-tos' (a popular name in Nigeria given to those who have been to Western Europe, Canada or the United States), many families believe that it is easy to obtain wealth abroad, and that earning money, in whatever way, will be quick. (Aghatise, 2004: 1132)

Aghatise offers a especially harsh criticism of a society that embraces consumerism and sells its daughters to pay for it:

The beginning years of Nigeria's economic boom from petrol dollars left the legacy of a people who had acquired a taste for a high standard of living and a consumer society that no longer had the means to satisfy its purchasing habits but was not ready to admit or accept it. (Aghatise, 2004: 1133)

Trafficking of women and girls to Italy demonstrates the fraying social fabric of Nigerian society, especially the ways in which women absorb the pressures placed on families under changing public policies. Most of the women trafficked to Italy are from polygamous families from the Edo ethnic group where wives are in a continuous struggle for a share of the family resources for themselves and their children. Even if men have jobs, their earnings are rarely enough to provide for the needs of the entire family. As Aghatise suggests:

because many men continue to marry more than one wife, it is women who are expected to assume more and more responsibility for families . . . women traditionally play an adhesive role in the social context of the Edo ethnic group. The success or failure of a family in its individual and collective projects is usually attributed to the women in the house. Thus, the greater responsibility is implicitly that of the women. (Aghatise, 2004: 1135)

The worsening conditions within the Nigerian economy, the weak welfare state, and cultural expectations of women meant that women who were trafficked in the 1990s were mainly much younger girls who set out on a job search to help their families.

Trafficking of girls and women is a problem, yet an additional issue concerns the use of girls within domestic sex work markets. In a rare analysis of how sex work is organized within a black society, Bamgbose examines emerging patterns of adolescent prostitution in Nigeria. As she bluntly claims, 'the truth is that in Nigeria, cultural values have broken

down' (Bamgbose, 2002: 569). Bamgbose describes how the global sex industry now penetrates into Nigerian society:

Adolescent prostitution is now out in the open in Nigeria after decades of what has amounted to a cross-cultural conspiracy of silence . . . it has assumed the proportion of a multibillion-dollar industry with adolescents being sold and traded like other mass-produced goods. It is no longer restricted to certain parts of the world; it has penetrated into Nigerian society and is now a thriving business in most Nigerian cities. (Bamgbose, 2002: 571)

Because the men who patronize the sex industry prefer younger sex workers, young women more often service clientele, with older women working as madams who procure the adolescent sex workers.

Offering a rare insight into adolescent sex work within an African society, Bamgbose describes how the domestic Nigerian sex work industry operates, one divided into a continuum of activities of the 'Sugar Daddy Syndrome', 'night brides', 'floating prostitutes', 'call girls', and finally, trafficking:

Unlike the traditional prostitutes who are usually older women, adolescent prostitutes start their careers in prostitution in more comfortable hotel rooms or in a more sophisticated style. This is what gave rise to the form of prostitution termed the 'Sugar Daddy Syndrome'. (Bamgbose, 2002: 572)

Under the Sugar Daddy Syndrome, young girls patronize men, usually older in age, for sexual pleasure. Such older men, who are wealthy, are usually referred to as 'sugar daddies' or 'man friends'. They are the favorites of adolescent girls who seek financial and material support in return for their services. The duration of this relationship lasts longer than a one-night stand, and the economic power wielded by such older and wealthy men, irrespective of educational status, puts the young girls involved in a particularly vulnerable position (Bamgbose, 2002: 572–3).

'Night brides' and 'floating prostitutes' solicit their clients on the streets of major cities. They differ, however, in several ways. 'Night brides' consist of young girls who search for customers on the street for a night of dating. They give preference to foreigners who are able to pay in foreign currency. One important aspect is that some are involved in sex work as a full-time activity, whereas others use it as part-time work. 'Many of the part-timers are students in secondary schools and universities who combine prostitution with schooling. They need the money to pay fees or acquire material things, such as clothes and shoes' (Bamgbose, 2002: 573). In contrast to these girls who search for dates for one evening, 'floating prostitutes' solicit business during the day and most closely resemble western notions of streetwalkers. Older men sexually abuse many of these girls in exchange for small amounts of money or gifts, which some hand over to their families. In contrast, college students in the sex work industry were more likely to work as 'call girls'. In such cases, male or female pimps get in

contact with already known and available girls whenever there is a demand for them.

The parallels between Nigerian responses to the IMF's structural adjustment policies and the reactions of poor and working-class African Americans to the social welfare policies of the Reagan/Bush administrations during this same period (1980–2005) are striking. With no jobs for its large youth population, poor Nigerian families learned to look the other way when traffickers commodified and exported its girls and women for the international sex industry and/or when girls saw domestic sex work as their only option. They learned to accommodate a changing set of social norms that pushed young girls toward sex work, for some for reasons of basic survival, yet for others as part of the costs of upward social mobility. Poor and working-class African American girls seemingly confront a similar set of challenges in the context of a different set of circumstances. In this regard, the continuum of sex work from sugar daddies, night brides, floating prostitutes, call girls and trafficked women also applies, yet in a different constellation that reflects the political and economic situation of African Americans as well as cultural values of American society.

Two important features may shape young African American women's participation in the sex work industry. For one, because African American girls are American citizens, they cannot be as easily trafficked as other groups of poor women who lack US citizenship. Girls are typically trafficked into the United States, not out of it. African American girls do enjoy some protections from these forms of exploitation, yet expanding the definition of sex work itself suggests that their patterns of participation have changed. For another, commercial sex work is not always a steady activity, but may occur simultaneously with other forms of income-generating work. In the global context, women sex workers also engage in domestic service, informal commercial trading, market-vending, shining shoes, or office work (Kempadoo and Doezama, 1998: 3). In a similar fashion, African American girls may have multiple sources of income, one of which is sex work. The 'night brides' and 'call girls' of Nigeria may find a domestic counterpart among black American adolescent girls, yet this activity would not be labeled 'sex work', nor would it be seen as prostitution. Restricting the concept of sex work and prostitute to the image of the streetwalker thus obscures the various ways that young black women's bodies and images are commodified and then circulated within the sex work industry.

'Sugar daddy' and 'night bride' sex work may be taking on new life in the context of shrinking economic opportunities. Take, for example, the sexual histories of young, Southern, rural poor black women. Some women start having sex at very young ages, almost always with older men, and find that they have little ability to persuade their partners to use condoms (Sack, 2001). An informal sex-for-money situation exists, where nothing is negotiated up front. Rather, unstated assumptions, where women who engage in

casual sex with men expect to be rewarded with a little financial help, perhaps in paying the rent, or in buying groceries, hold sway. From the outside, these behaviors may seem to be morally lax, yet the impoverished black women engaged in sex-for-money relationships desperately need the money, especially if they have elderly parents or dependent children (Sack, 2001). This informal sex-for-money situation is sex work. As Kempadoo points out, 'in most cases, sex work is not for individual wealth but for family well-being or survival' (Kempadoo and Doezama, 1998: 4).

The consequences of this sex-for-material-goods situation can be tragic. The pressures for young black women to engage in sex work have affected the rapid growth of HIV/AIDS among poor black women in the Mississippi Delta and across the rural South. Between 1990 and 2000, Southern states with large African American populations experienced a dramatic increase in HIV infections among African American women. For example, in Mississippi, 28.5 percent of those reporting new HIV infections in 2000 were black women, up from 13 percent in 1990. In Alabama, the number rose to 31 percent, from 13 percent, whereas in North Carolina, it rose to 27 percent, from 18 percent (Sack, 2001). Most of the women contracted HIV through heterosexual contact, and most found out that they were HIV positive when they became pregnant. The women took risks that may at first seem nonsensical. Yet in the context of their lives there was a sense that because they had so little control over other aspects of their lives, they felt that if God wanted them to get AIDS, then they resigned themselves to getting it.

These examples suggest that many young African American women resign themselves to commodifying their bodies as a necessary source of income. They may not be streetwalkers in the traditional sense, but they also view commodified black sexuality as the commodity of value that they can exchange. These relations also become difficult to disrupt in the context of a powerful mass media that defines and sells images of sexualized black women as one icon of seemingly authentic black culture. Young African American women encounter a set of representations that naturalizes and normalizes social relations of sex work. Whether she sleeps with men for pleasure, drugs, revenge, or money, the sexualized bitch constitutes a modern version of the Jezebel, repackaged for contemporary mass media. In discussing this updated Jezebel image, cultural critic Lisa Jones distinguishes between gold diggers/skeezers, namely, women who screw for status, and crack 'hos', namely, women who screw for a fix (1994: 79). Some women are the 'hos' who trade sexual favors for jobs, money, drugs and other material items. The female hustler, a materialist woman who is willing to sell, rent, or use her sexuality to get whatever she wants constitutes this sexualized variation of the bitch. This image appears with increasing frequency, especially in conjunction with trying to catch an African American man with money. Athletes are targets, and having a baby with an

athlete is a way to garner income. Black women who are sex workers, namely, those who engage in phone sex, lap dancing, and prostitution for compensation, also populate this universe of sexualized bitches. The prostitute who hustles without a pimp and who keeps the compensation is a bitch who works for herself.

Black male involvement in the sex work industry may not involve the direct exploitation of black men's bodies as much as the objectification and commodification of sexualized black male images within hip hop culture. The prevalence of representations of black men as pimps speaks to this image of black men as sexual hustlers who use their sexual prowess to exploit women, both black and white. Ushered in by a series of films in the 'Blaxploitation' era, the ubiquitous black pimp seems here to stay. Kept alive through HBO produced quasi-documentaries such as *Pimps Up, Hos Down*, African American men feature prominently in mass media. Despite these media constructions, actual pimps see themselves more as businessmen than as sexual predators. For example, the men interviewed in the documentary *American Pimp* all discuss the skills involved in being a successful pimp. One went so far as to claim that only African American men made really good pimps. Thus, the controlling image of the black pimp combines all of elements of the more generic hustler, namely, engaging in illegal activity, using women for economic gain, and refusing to work.

Representations of black women and men as prostitutes and pimps permeate music videos, film and television. In the context of a powerful global mass media, black men's bodies are increasingly objectified within popular culture in ways that resemble the treatment of all women. Violence and sexuality sell, and associating black men with both is virtually sure to please. Yet the real struggle is less about the content of black male and black female images and more about the treatment of black people's bodies as valuable commodities within advertising and entertainment. Because this new constellation of images participates in commodified global capitalism, in all cases, representations of black people's bodies are tied to structures of profitability. Athletes and criminals alike are profitable, not for the vast majority of African American men, but for the people who own the teams, control the media, provide food, clothing and telephone services to the prisons, and who consume seemingly endless images of pimps, hustlers, rapists, and felons. What is different, however, is how these images of authentic blackness generate additional consumer markets beyond the selling of these specific examples of cultural production.

Recognizing the value of commodified black culture, many African American rap stars have started their own record labels, clothing companies, and more recently, sports drink divisions. Their desire lies in sharing the profits of a huge global consumer market of youth who purchase

the rap CDs, sports drinks, gym shoes, and clothing lines of hip hop culture. Take, for example, the 2003 release of Pimp Juice, a new sports beverage that was lauded by Vibe magazine as the best energy drink. Despite Pimp Juice's claims that it provides vitamins and that its 10 percent apple juice content makes it healthy, the yellow and white design of its can resembles beer cans. Initially, Pimp Juice was marketed within African American neighborhoods, yet by 2004 Pimp Juice was disseminated by 60 distributors in the United States, in 32 states and in 81 markets. According to its distributor, because Pimp Juice is flying off the shelves in the UK, the Caribbean Islands, and Mexico, the distributor aims to sell the product in Australia, Japan, China and Israel. The irony of this particular product is that Nelly, the rap star whose song titled 'Pimp Juice' helped resurrect the popularity of the concept of the pimp, also owns the company that distributes Pimp Juice.

This one product illustrates the increasingly seamless relations among the commodification of black images (pimp/prostitute), struggles between corporations and hip hop capitalists (rap star Nelly) in search of new consumer markets, the expansion of new consumer markets (how Pimp Juice is marketed to black consumers), and potentially new systems of control within African American civil society that grow from the same conditions that sparked changes within Nigerian society. Beverage makers claim that pimp juice is a benign sports drink – www.letitloose.com, Pimp Juice's official web site describe it as a 'healthy, non-carbonated energy drink possessing a tropical berry flavor' – yet when Black American youth buy pimp juice at their corner store, they most likely are singing the lyrics Nelly's song 'Pimp Juice' while they pay \$1.89 for one can of actual 'Pimp Juice'.

The lyrics of Nelly's song 'Pimp Juice' make it clear what pimp juice really is and who it is for. Nelly opens his song by boasting that because his woman only wants him for his 'pimp juice', he needs to 'cut her loose'. He then moves on to describe the power seats, leather and sunroof of his pimp-mobile. When 'hoes see it', according to Nelly, they 'can't believe it'. Nelly knows their game and puts them out, telling them to dust their shoes off so as not to touch his rug. For those who still don't get it, Nelly ends his song with a rousing definition of pimp juice: 'your pimp juice is anything, attract the opposite sex, it could be money, fame, or straight intellect'. Always an equal-opportunity kind of guy, Nelly proclaims, 'bitches got the pimp juice too, come to think about it dirty, they got more than we do'. By itself, the song 'Pimp Juice' is just a song. Yet when coupled with the music video of Nelly representing a pimp and mass marketing campaigns that put cans of actual Pimp Juice in corner stores for young African Americans to see and buy, the circle is complete.

IMPLICATIONS

African American youths' encounters with Pimp Juice comprise the case examined here, yet the new commodities and new consumer markets in this example point to much larger issues. The hip hop capitalism of Nelly's brilliant marketing of 'Pimp Juice' illustrates how sexualized understandings of black women's and men's bodies and culture become marketed and put up for sale in the global marketplace. It also focuses on new consumers of bodies and images, in particular, how black people become target audiences for their own degradation (e.g. the case of pimp juice) as well as Nelly's plans to go global with this popular product. When it comes to the commodification of black bodies, few African Americans celebrate the criminal justice system. At the same time, when it comes to the commodification of images associated with prison culture as well as an array of products that seemingly signal a seemingly authentic black culture, blacks are well represented among the consumers of these images.

This article points to the need to develop new frameworks for studying how non-immigrant or native populations fare under advanced capitalism. When it comes to race, globalization literature typically focuses on immigrant experiences catalyzed by transnational labor markets. The new racial/ethnic communities within the United States, Canada, the UK, France, the Netherlands and similar white societies garner the bulk of attention, with the core issue being the ability of such groups to assimilate into the host country. Whether voluntary immigrants or desperate refugees, the process of immigration signals leaving behind the unknown for the promise of an unknown and often hoped for better future. Yet how might we understand racial/ethnic populations with lengthy histories within the borders of advanced industrial societies? Poor and working-class African American youth, for example, are stuck in hyperghettos with nowhere to go. In this regard, African American youth share much with indigenous populations such as Native Americans, the Maori of New Zealand, and the Aboriginal peoples of Australia who faced conquest and genocide within their white settler societies and/or ethnic nation states. At the same time, because contemporary inner city African American youth are typically a third- and fourth-generation urban population, they share space with the very same new immigrant groups of color for whom America still represents new hope. In essence, this focus on African American youth and similar populations may shed light on what is in store for other groups who find themselves structurally irrelevant in their newly claimed societies. When Tupac Shakur and others of his generation say, 'It's just me against the world, baby, me against the world. I got nothin' to lose – it's just me against the world' perhaps we should put down our cans of Pimp Juice and listen.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of general issues of globalization and race in the United States, see (Andrews, 1999; Barlow, 2003). For a comparative analysis of how African American, Caribbean and East African youth are situated in the global economy, see (Green, 2001). Green's study remains valuable, yet he implicitly upholds the nihilism thesis via his focus on powerlessness as an outcome of globalization.
- 2 This commodification of black culture and its use within advertising is nothing new. Take, for example, how images of blackness and black culture have long permeated American advertising campaigns. In her discussion of 'contemptible collectibles', Patricia A. Turner examines how, since the early 1980s, interest in collecting 'black Americana' has grown dramatically (Turner, 1994: 9–68). The vast amount of this 'black' memorabilia is striking. From the Jolly Darkie Target Game (1890) marketed by Milton Bradley (whose goal was to score a bulls-eye by throwing a ball into the gaping mouth of a black male figure) (11), to *Darkie* toothpaste (renamed *Darlie* in the 1990s), people of African descent have figured prominently in commodity capitalism and the growth of advertising designed to sell products. Through a comprehensive content analysis of the themes in these material objects, Turner demonstrates how closely tied black images actually were to the growth of marketplace relations in nineteenth century America. As Turner points out, 'even after the institution of slavery was over, American consumers found acceptable ways of buying and selling the souls of black folk. Writers, dealers, and other authorities who persist in calling these toys, ephemeral objects, kitchenware, and related items *black* cultural artifacts are wrong. With few exceptions, these items were made by and for white people' (Turner, 1994: 11). Then and now, advertisers realize what is at stake in developing and packaging images of blackness that might help their projects sell to their target markets. In the past, images of Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima seemed to be isolated symbols used to sell rice and pancake products.
- 3 It is important to remember that a material base underlies consumption. Consumers remain tethered to market economies not simply via psychology, but also through structures of debt. Increasingly sophisticated mechanisms of debt constitute the material base of consumption and thus are an essential albeit invisible part of the prompting that is needed for consumption. Credit encourages excess consumption, and businesses know it. Moreover, using credit encourages debt. The easy availability of credit cards for US college students, for example, encourages excess consumption against the collateral of future earnings and/or the accumulated wealth of their families. In the United States, individuals are encouraged to see debt as a moral failing, the result of a series of poor choices of uncontrolled spending. Yet as a dimension of social class relations, the politics of credit and debt are far more complicated than the misguided actions of individual college students.
- 4 Feminist scholarship led the way in refocusing attention on the body itself as a site of objectification, commodification and exploitation. In the 1990s, post-structuralist analysis of the body examined how the objectification of women's bodies constituted a key pillar of gender oppression (Bordo, 1993). Rejecting biological notions of the body, such scholarship investigated how power relations of gender operate by writing cultural scripts onto women's bodies. This shift to

- conceptualizing the body as a canvas created space for new arguments about sexuality that challenged medical views of bodies solely as biological organisms that were ruled by allegedly natural instincts. Treating the body as a blank canvas also created space for arguments about multiple genders, not just the binary two of Western society. Thus, this basic shift in understandings of the body provided promising new avenues of investigation for scholars of gender and sexuality.
- 5 Feminist research has made important strides in moving beyond understandings of prostitution as inherently degrading. Liberal views imply that any participation in prostitution is evidence either of coercion (usually economic desperation) or immorality (Zatz, 1997). Building on Marxist theories of prostitution as alienated labor and of prostitutes as sex workers, radical feminists argue that because prostitution involves sex, it is linked as much to the organization of gender and sexuality as it is to the organization of wage labor. Collectively, feminist scholarship has shifted thinking away from seeing female prostitutes as passive victims of predatory systems of power and toward sex workers as agents or workers within a global sex work industry. This work extracts discussions of sex work from the psychological realm of the imagined relationship between worker and client, and back onto the significance of sex work in global capitalism. According to Kamala Kempadoo, the term *sex worker* suggests we ‘view prostitution not as an identity – a social or a psychological characteristic of women, often indicated by “whore” – but as an income-generating activity or form of labor for women and men. The definition stresses the social location of those engaged in sex industries as working people’ (Kempadoo and Doezama, 1998: 3).
 - 6 The global sex work industry has four main dimensions. First, through the increased movement of bodies associated with migration and the travel industry, sex tourism constitutes an increasing share of global sex work. ‘Global forces also shape the consumption of sexual services by fostering tourism as an industry aimed at those who have the resources to travel and purchase what they desire, thus, facilitating the commodification of both male desire and women’s bodies within the global capitalist economy’ (Wonders and Michalowski, 2001: 546). Second, sex workers who service clients constitute the foundation of the industry. Overwhelmingly female, sex workers come from all backgrounds, yet are most likely to be individuals whose position in society limits their structural power (race, ethnicity, poverty, citizenship status, etc.). Third, the global sex work industry generates income for groups that do not directly service clients but whose income depends on the profitability of sex for sale. Managers (pimps and madams), police, landlords, smugglers, and others who profit from sex work itself constitute a broad-based infrastructure of the global sex work industry. Finally, the sex work industry requires an advertising and marketing arm to create demand. Thus, mass media and the culture industry that stimulate male desire for sex workers constitute an essential part of the sex work industry. The vast pornographic empire in Los Angeles is part of this demand structure, as is the marketing of sexuality via forms as diverse as toothpaste advertisements and music videos.
 - 7 Kempadoo takes issue with some versions of this depiction, viewing this approach as an example of cultural racism through international discourses on prostitution. According to Kempadoo, racial/ethnic women ‘seem to be trapped

in underdeveloped states, Third World prostitutes continue to be positioned in this discourse as incapable of making decisions about their own lives, forced by overwhelming external powers completely beyond their control into submission and slavery. Western women's experience is thus made synonymous with assumptions about the inherent superiority of industrialized capitalist development and Third World women placed in categories of pre-technological 'backwardness,' inferiority, dependency and ignorance' (Kempadoo and Doezama, 1998: 12).

References

- Aghatise, E. (2004) 'Trafficking for Prostitution in Italy', *Violence Against Women* 10(10): 1126–55
- Alexander, M.J. (1997) 'Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Industry', in M.J. Alexander and C.T. Mohanty (eds) *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, pp. 63–100. New York: Routledge.
- Andrews, Marcellus (1999) *The Political Economy of Hope and Fear: Capitalism and the Black Condition in America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bamgbose, O. (2002) 'Teenage Prostitution and the Future of the Female Adolescent in Nigeria', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 46(5): 569–85.
- Barlow, Andrew L. (2003) *Between Fear and Hope: Globalization and Race in the United States*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Behrens, A. and C. Uggen (2003) 'Ballot Manipulation and the "Menace of Negro Domination": Racial Threat and Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States, 1850–2001', *American Journal of Sociology* 109(3): 559–605.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003) *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bordo, S. (1993) *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Collins, P.H. (2004) *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Emeagwali, G.T. (1995) *Women Pay the Price: Structural Adjustment in Africa and the Caribbean*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.
- Green, Charles (2001) *Manufacturing Powerlessness in the Black Diaspora: Inner City Youth and the New Global Frontier*. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press.
- Guillumin, C. (1995) *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology*. New York: Routledge.
- Guinier, L. and G. Torres (2002) *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jones, Lisa (1994) *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair*. New York: Doubleday.
- Kelley, R.D.G. (1994) *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: Free Press.
- Kamala Kempadoo and J. Doezema (1998) *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*. New York: Routledge.
- Sack, K. (2001) 'AIDS Epidemic Takes Toll on Black Women', [<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/03/health/03AIDS.html?pagewanted=print>].

- Spillers, H.J. (2000) 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', J. James and T.D. Sharpley-Whiting (eds) *The Black Feminist Reader*, pp. 57–87. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Turner, P.A. (1994) *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture*. New York: Anchor.
- Wacquant, L. (2001) 'Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh', *Punishment & Society* 3(1): 95–134.
- West, C. (1993) *Race Matters*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Wilson, W.J. (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, W.J. (1996) *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Knopf.
- Wonders, N.A. and Michalowski, R. (2001) 'Bodies, Borders, and Sex Tourism in a Globalized World: A Tale of Two Cities – Amsterdam and Havana', *Social Problems* 48(4): 545–71.
- Zatz, N.D. (1997) 'Sex Work/Sex Act: Law, Labor, and Desire in Constructions of Prostitution', *Signs* 22(2): 277–308.

PATRICIA HILL COLLINS is Distinguished University Professor at the University of Maryland, College Park. Address: Department of Sociology, 2112 Art-Sociology Building, #146. College Park, MD 20742-1315, USA. [email: pcollins@socy.umd.edu]