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Culture Swapping: Consumption and the Ethnogenesis of Middle-Class Haitian Immigrants

LAURA R. OSWALD *

By means of an ethnographic study of a Haitian family in the midwestern United States, this article demonstrates how ethnic consumers "culture swap," using goods to move between one cultural identity and another as they negotiate relations between home and host cultures. This interpretation of consumer behavior is grounded in a semiotics of performance, emphasizing the dynamic and mutable nature of self, social identity, and cultural identification in global consumer culture.

The boundless diversity of American consumer culture places in question the modernist logic of self, system, and sign and challenges the assumptions of qualitative research grounded in that logic. In global consumer culture, the signs and symbols of ethnic difference have been commodified to the point that they are isolated from historical processes and social relations forming culture through time. As a result, consumers routinely "culture swap"—they borrow or buy the cultural trappings of other groups in order to form an identity, frustrating attempts to target consumers strictly by demographic type or even product usage (Croft 1994), since goods take on different meanings as consumers move between one identity and another. The mobility of consumers between multiple cultural frames undercuts the metaphysical stance of modernist research toward the consumer as abstraction, as universal consciousness or "I" impervious to the complexities of race, gender, and ethnicity. Consumer culture swapping undermines positivist attempts to understand consumer behavior in areas as diverse as food, health care, or movies. (Deshpande, Hoyer, and Donthu 1986; Pénaloza 1994; Thompson and MacDonald 1989). This article demonstrates how a semiotics of performance can help consumer researchers make sense of consumer mobility among several often conflicting identities and anticipate crises of identity resulting from social change.

Although the current study is about multicultural consumption rather than Haitians per se, the consumer behavior of Haitian immigrants entering the United States in the past 40 years serves as a timely illustration of ways consumers use goods to move between two or more cultural contexts. Haitian culture is already highly stratified by race, class, and educational hierarchies, to the point that it forms a mosaic of languages, colors, and behaviors (Laguerre 1984, p. 30). The American "odyssey" described by Laguerre (1984) adds yet another dimension to this already rich cultural mix. Nonetheless, media representations and U.S. immigration policies reduce this mosaic to a misleading homogeneity characterized primarily by race (Laguerre 1984, p. 16). As Mittelberg and Waters (1992, p. 431) point out, in America color transcends culture, so the Department of Immigration assigns Haitians to the host culture of African Americans, even though Haitians reject that identity. Such black-and-white thinking obscures the fact that Haitian ethnicity was, and continues to be, forged by a history of European, African, and Amerindian (Arawak/Taino) cultures in contact at different stages of the conquest, colonization, and liberation of Saint Domingue.

British anthropologist Mary Douglas has said that "consumption is the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979, p. 57). This article underscores the role of consumption in the construction of Haitian-American identity, the instability of that construct, and the importance of "context shifting" or deixis for theorizing about the movement of ethnic identity between several worlds at once. Throughout, discussion focuses on the semiotic dimension of goods—their value as signs and symbols for social inclusion or exclusion. This article also inverts the equation and focuses on the commodity value of cultural symbols: from daishikis to pita bread, consumer goods enable transitory excursions into ethnic cultures.

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In consumer culture, ethnicity can be bought, sold, and worn like a loose garment. Bouchet (1996, p. 90) goes so far as to define ethnicity as a demand for identity in a society that denies the immigrant integration, in a world where traditional group identity around family and nation have broken down, and where image has replaced reality. Unlike positivist studies that "establish a relationship between ethnicity as an independent variable and consumption as dependent variable" (Venkatesh 1996, p. 28), the current approach emphasizes the interdependence between consumption and ethnicity as moments in the ongoing construction of personal and social identity. Although the article is divided into a description of ethnographic methods and data, a summary of relevant consumer research literature, an interpretation of data, and theoretical conclusions, theory and ethnographic observation are interwoven throughout.

ETHNOGRAPHY

The theoretical debates raised in this article are cast against first-hand observations of an extended family of first-generation Haitians in a small, midwestern American city. The study covered one year beginning in the winter of 1992. Three months were spent collecting data by means of participant observation, unstructured long interviews, field trips, written questionnaires, and group interviews. Follow-up conversations were conducted by phone for another nine months. Data were collected by means of tape-recorded interviews, detailed notes, and photographs of the research setting, whether home, school, or work. Participant identities have been disguised. Findings were reviewed with experts in the fields of ethnography, consumer research, and Haitian affairs and supported by statistical data obtained from the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Interpretations of data, such as the meaning of certain foods for social status, were verified with main informants.

The microcosm under study provided rich material for analyzing the role of consumption in identity formation. By moving between a detailed, "thick description" of culture (Geertz 1973, p. 7) and theoretical extrapolation, the ethnographic part of this study aims to give flesh to current theoretical debates surrounding multicultural consumer research.

In the course of the study, I did not identify with the "native's point of view" (Geertz 1983) or lay claim to the intimate knowledge of Haitian culture available to Haitian writers such as Michel LaGuerre. As an American, I was sufficiently distanced from the target culture to foreground differences between Haitian and midwestern American culture. Moreover, having been bilingual in French language and immersed in French culture for many years, I was able to discern conflicts and similarities between French influence and the indigenous Creole culture. Nonetheless, as a white American academic speaking French with a Parisian accent, I was the "ugly American" and struggled to overcome resistance and

defensiveness among informants fearful of being pigeonholed into stereotypes or fetishized into objects of curiosity. This group was very sophisticated and self-conscious about being investigated by an outsider. In addition, I also resisted being pigeonholed by informants, whose distrust of the U.S. government under President Bush dates back to the American military occupation of Haiti (1915–34). They were reminded that I did not represent the views of the Bush Administration. Also, polarizing political discussions were avoided.

The study grew from initial contacts with a housewife, Odette Girard, arranged through a mutual friend. From the start, Odette was friendly, open, and cooperative. Odette lives with her husband, three small children, and father- and mother-in-law in a four bedroom split-level home in a middle-class urban neighborhood. They lived with the husband's parents when they were first married, and now the in-laws live with them and participate in child rearing, which is a common situation in Haiti (Bastien 1961, p. 488). Odette herself was taken in by her deceased father's family in Haiti when her mother emigrated to the United States in 1960. Odette's home is furnished in a modern American style, yet objects in the home create a Caribbean ambiance. For example, large plants and colorful artificial flowers add a tropical atmosphere to the living room. On the walls are paintings of a Haitian marketplace, painted by an uncle. On the stove is an espresso coffee pot, a remnant of the French colonial experience, rather than a reflection of the current American craze for European-style coffees. In the family room is a sign, "I ♥ Haiti."

The family lives in a large, culturally diverse university town with a significant Haitian population. One church in the town, the Première Eglise Evangélique Baptiste Haitienne, serves specifically the Haitian community, and two Catholic churches hold masses entirely in French for Haitian parishioners. Odette's children are enrolled in a magnet school in the public school system, where they benefit from special programs in the arts. To illustrate the economic diversity of the town, the median value of property in this city is \$184,000, while the prices of homes on the market range from \$60,000 to over \$1,000,000.

Odette, a vivacious woman in her thirties, runs a small day-care service in the family room of her home and was eager to talk while the children napped. She provided access to extended family, including a brother who produces a Haitian radio program, a sister who teaches elementary school, and a sister-in-law who allowed me to interview her bilingual class at the high school. Odette's family was observed at work and play in their home, especially the kitchen. I went to the market with Odette, discussed the family photo album with her, interviewed guests at her brother's radio program, and wrote family trees.

Odette arrived in the United States at age 11, spent three years in the U.S. army, including a tour in Germany, and went to an American university. She has still not applied for citizenship. In addition to the day-care center,

she runs a small catering business on weekends, where she prepares Haitian pastries for parties. In Haiti it is very common for housewives to engage in cottage industries, especially in the countryside, where cash is scarce. Unfortunately, Odette would not let herself be observed preparing the pastries, saying she did not want anyone to copy her, but she offered some to me.

Odette seemed unflustered by the constant traffic of two families and the day-care operation in her home. Her husband worked irregular shifts as manager of a large store and was not around very much. Moreover, the mother-in-law went away to visit family in Miami during the course of the study. Family members were always dropping by. For instance, young cousins came by after school and her sister came by after work. In other words, even in migration, family ties were maintained and strengthened.

Although much has been written about the division of Haitian society between the rural poor and the rich elite (Leyburn 1941, p. 3), the family interviewed in this study was situated somewhere in the middle. Educated in French schools and growing up in Port-au-Prince with servants, they definitely did not belong to the indigenous Creole culture. However, they hardly resembled the rich propertied elite of Haiti either. By means of a questionnaire distributed to members of the household, it was discovered that Odette's father-in-law, Robert, Sr., had white, French grandfathers on both sides. It was not unusual in his day for mulatto children to be sent to France for higher education. In fact, his paternal grandfather and uncle died on the *Titanic* on the way home from France. This family nonetheless works hard for a living in America and views education as the ladder to social improvement.

The family has relatives in New York and Miami, sites of the largest Haitian settlements in the United States. In a migration pattern typical of this group, Odette's aunt and older sister arrived in the United States first, through the network established by the relatives in New York who entered the country in the late 1950s (Laguerre 1984, pp. 33–35). Odette entered the United States in 1964. Although it is impossible to obtain an accurate measure of the Haitian population in the United States because of the number of illegal immigrants, the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1992) reports about one million Haitian immigrants, citizens and noncitizens. Although this group obviously cannot compare in sheer numbers to the Latino population in America, estimated to be nearly 25 million (Péñaloza 1994), their consumer behavior nonetheless provides important information about relations between consumption, ethnicity, and cultural identity.

In addition to social and economic divisions among these immigrants, generational differences also determined the relative acceptance or rejection of French colonial culture as a frame of reference. The three generations of "first-generation" immigrants in the study, including Odette's in-laws and older sister, Odette's contemporaries, and teenage students at the high school, reflect demo-

graphic trends listed in the U.S. Census (1992). By and large, earlier immigrants were better educated, included more people from managerial and professional echelons, and had lower unemployment rates than more recent immigrants.

The older first-generation Haitians in the study had French ancestors and identified more with French elite culture, including Roman Catholicism and French language, than popular Creole culture. These findings confirm Valdman's (1975, p. 66) observations, that most Haitians practice varying degrees of *diglossia*, dual language use, depending on social status. Elite and upper-middle-class Haitians use French in public and official settings and either French or Creole at home, while the poor may have little or no knowledge of French (Ans 1987, p. 299). For instance, in Haiti, Odette's family used to speak French at the dinner table but Creole to the cooks. In America, however, her father-in-law, Robert, Sr., still speaks Parisian French rather than Creole, is excessively polite, and dresses in a suit and tie, while Odette and her brother René speak Creole, dress casually, and dispense with formality. At the radio station where René produces a Haitian culture program, he insisted on first names and spoke to me in English even though I am fluent in French. Odette's sister Edith, older by 14 years, speaks French rather than Creole to other Haitians, travels to France more often than to Haiti, and references France as a source of style and culture. At the other extreme, teenagers at the high school who entered the United States in the past five years speak Creole better than French and reference Haiti rather than France as the source of their ethnicity.

Like her sister, Odette was educated in French schools in Haiti, was raised Catholic, and belonged to the elite francophone class. Unlike her sister, Odette currently prefers to speak Creole to her children and to her father-in-law, even though her father-in-law speaks French to her and the children address her in English. Moreover, she does not plan to teach French to her children, saying, "What's the use?" She references Haiti as "home" and Creole as "our language."

As for religion, since most of the literature on Haitian culture focuses on the rural peasant class, Haitians are expected to be hiding a *loa*, or voodoo spirit, in every closet. This, of course, was not true of the population under study, all Christians. Odette was raised Catholic but began attending Methodist services in the United States when she got married. Although participants admitted that everyone recognizes voodoo as an element of the indigenous folk culture, they agreed that voodoo, a remnant of African culture, is practiced by the lower classes, not by them. As Odette puts it, "You don't really believe it but you hear the drums at night and you think, maybe . . . maybe."

Odette's sister-in-law, Solange, allowed me to visit her bilingual class at the high school. The most recently immigrated participants in the study, these students had closer ties to rural culture, coming as they do from lower-mid-

dle-class backgrounds, than did the older participants in the study. They were studying French because they were raised speaking Creole, having come from a lower class in Haiti than Odette and her family. True to U.S. Census statistics (1992), the more recent immigrants from Haiti represent fewer professionals and white-collar workers and more manual laborers and service workers. They are nonetheless in a class above unskilled peasants. In stories they were asked to write about their homes in Haiti, they described killing chickens for dinner, going hunting in the jungle, and living in little houses in the country. For the most part they did not speak French fluently. The high school children reported that relatives had participated in voodoo rituals, but that they were nonetheless Christians, since voodoo and Christianity are blended together in local rites. As Deren (1953, pp. 49–105) and Métraux (1958, pp. 287–323) observed, in the same way Creole language incorporates European and African elements, voodoo rites incorporate European and Christian symbolism and ritual. Moreover, since voodoo is a social as well as cultural marker, everyone in Haiti is influenced by voodoo whether they practice it or not. Laguerre (1989) points out how the organization of Haitian society into a network of parishes led by voodoo priests defines social and political boundaries and centers of influence in Haiti. While at different times in Haiti's history the Catholic Church tried to abolish this practice, especially the drum beating, Haitian nationalists, François Duvalier in particular, encouraged voodoo as an expression of Haitian ethnicity (see Ans 1987, p. 210).

Very little has been published on Haitian middle-class culture. Most of the ethnographic research on Haiti examines the rural peasant population, whose exotic customs and voodoo spirits stir the imagination (e.g., Bastien 1961; Deren 1953; Herskovitz 1937; Leyburn 1941; Métraux [1959] 1972; and Moreau de Saint-Méry 1958). This supports Fine's (1994) claim that the social sciences tend to cast light on the "noble savage" in order to maintain distance between the dominant discourse and its "others." The dominant class has trouble taking account of itself. Only since the mass exodus of the educated professional class in the 1960s have ethnographers such as Laguerre (1984) begun to investigate family ties, medical practices, and social organization within the Haitian middle class. Ironically, it is only as this group, considered elite in Haiti, is "othered" through migration that it becomes an object of ethnography (see Fine 1994). Even the family in the present study belonged to the upper-middle-class in Haiti, where they attended private French schools and had servants. In the United States they work hard to be part of a striving, educated middle class without the luxuries of their former life.

The bilingual class of teenagers included the most vociferous of all participants in criticism of American culture, black or white. During a class session, students filled out a background questionnaire including when they immigrated, what their parents did and what language(s) they spoke at home. Next, they participated in focused

discussions about their experiences in the United States, how they liked living in the town, and so on. On two other occasions some of the students volunteered to participate in unstructured discussions in the cafeteria after school. During these informal discussions they were more open than in the classroom about their feelings and attitudes. They gave the overriding impression that, having only recently immigrated to the United States, they were shocked at being treated like second-class citizens by whites. Even those who were descended from slaves in Haiti criticized African-American culture, as they perceived it, for breaking family ties, eating fast food, watching too much television, and spending too much money on trendy clothes and gadgets.

They were especially offended by media representations of blacks in general and Haitians in particular. I asked them to report back to me in a week with specific examples of such imagery from newspapers, magazines, and television. At the time of my study, the Haitian military, supported by the *tontons macoutes* military police, had just ousted democratically elected president Aristide, torturing and killing Aristide supporters. The next time the students and I met we discussed images of the mass flight of Haitian "boat people" to Miami. Students were particularly offended by claims that Haitians were contaminating the population with the AIDS virus. It was not uncommon to see televised reports of American soldiers holding the boat people in camps at Guantanamo military base as if they were criminals. Press and television reports described Haiti as a third-world country with high unemployment, low life expectancy, and high poverty (see Masland, Katel, and Mabry 1992, pp. 30–31).

Though not part of the social elite, this group was proud of their history and culture. Haitians, after all, ended slavery in a bloody revolution more than half a century before American abolition and have a history of black self-rule. Moreover, when slaves were freed in Haiti the plantations were distributed evenly among them, so, poor as they may be, the Haitian peasantry owns property, which is passed from generation to generation by law (Leyburn 1941, p. 53).

CONSUMER IDENTITY

Code Switching

This section addresses the implications of multicultural consumption for consumer identity. Early on in the fieldwork, contradictions emerged between respondents' self-concept and the self-image they communicated through their behavior. For example, Odette viewed herself as "so mainstream" as to offer little about Haitians, but, in fact, kept demonstrating very lively contact with her ethnic culture. Her living room was furnished in modern style with palm trees, Caribbean paintings, and flowers, she cooked ethnic meals for her family, including beans, rice, yams, and fish, and speaks Creole to her children. Her brother, in the United States for almost 40

years, keeps in touch with a broad network of contacts within the Haitian community and holds onto the dream of returning to Haiti one day. "We tolerate Americans, but we'll never assimilate," he said. He nonetheless participates in American consumer culture, eats fast food, sends his children to American colleges, and enjoys prime-time television. This illustrates how in order to negotiate the day-to-day border crossings between home and host culture, immigrants switch cultural codes constantly, adapting to the expectations of both home culture and host culture as the situation demands.

The middle generation of immigrants focused on here, who were children when they entered the United States in the 1960s, more obviously straddles the line between French colonial culture and Creole culture than their elders, since they were educated in French schools but were then caught up in the politics of Creolization in the 1970s and 1980s, adopting popular Creole culture as their own. Newer immigrants, however, tend to come from the lower classes and identify more closely with Creole culture than with French culture initially (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992, pp. 107–108). So each generation of first-generation immigrants comes to the United States with its own particular cultural baggage and negotiates contact with American culture in its own way. In the ethnographic study of a Haitian-American family, code switching was most obviously expressed in the transition from one language to another but extended also to nonverbal codes such as food preparation and dress.

For example, during an initial visit at the Girard household, Odette insisted she was so mainstream as to provide nothing at all about Haitian culture, having lived in the United States for 30 years and having served in the U.S. Army. In almost the same breath, however, she stated offhandedly that she was storing a butchered goat in her freezer for an upcoming birthday party. She was prompted to make this comment when asked to accompany me on a shopping trip to the supermarket. She declined, saying she had no more room in her freezer. She had had the goat butchered at a farm in Wisconsin, about two hours away. Odette planned to hold the children's party at Chuck E. Cheese, a pizzeria chain, but invited relatives to the home for a Haitian barbecue and the ubiquitous rice and beans. Although it is not so unusual for first-generation Haitians to serve goat meat, a meat source much more common than beef in Haiti's rocky terrain, though less popular than pork, it was surprising that Odette did not claim the goat as a symbol for her ethnicity.

Moreover, Odette's current lifestyle seemed to clash with her self-concept. She took pride in her French connections, her Catholic education, and the French-speaking, middle-class household where she grew up, where Creole was only spoken "to the servants." She nonetheless consumes lower-class foods, such as cornmeal, and insists that "Creole is our language." The same is true of her brother, who condemned the Bush Administration for neglecting the Haitian boat people seeking refuge in Miami. Yet when asked if he or others in his entourage

would sponsor a refugee and help them immigrate, he insisted that it was not their responsibility.

The initial ambiguity of Odette's statements could be clarified by framing them within the cultural realities of her social group (Venkatesh 1996, p. 27). Getting inside the native's point of view enabled me to transcend my own expectations about the coherence of ethnic behavior. This became clear as broad cultural categories emerged from the data, categories defining relations of status, inclusion, and consumption. Conversations with Odette generated the terms for these categories, including food, religion, and language, which were then checked out with other informants. These categories were charted in order to demonstrate how the individual's personal and social identity, symbolized in the pronoun "I," is constantly pulled in several directions at once, including class, race, and ethnic identification. See Figure 1.

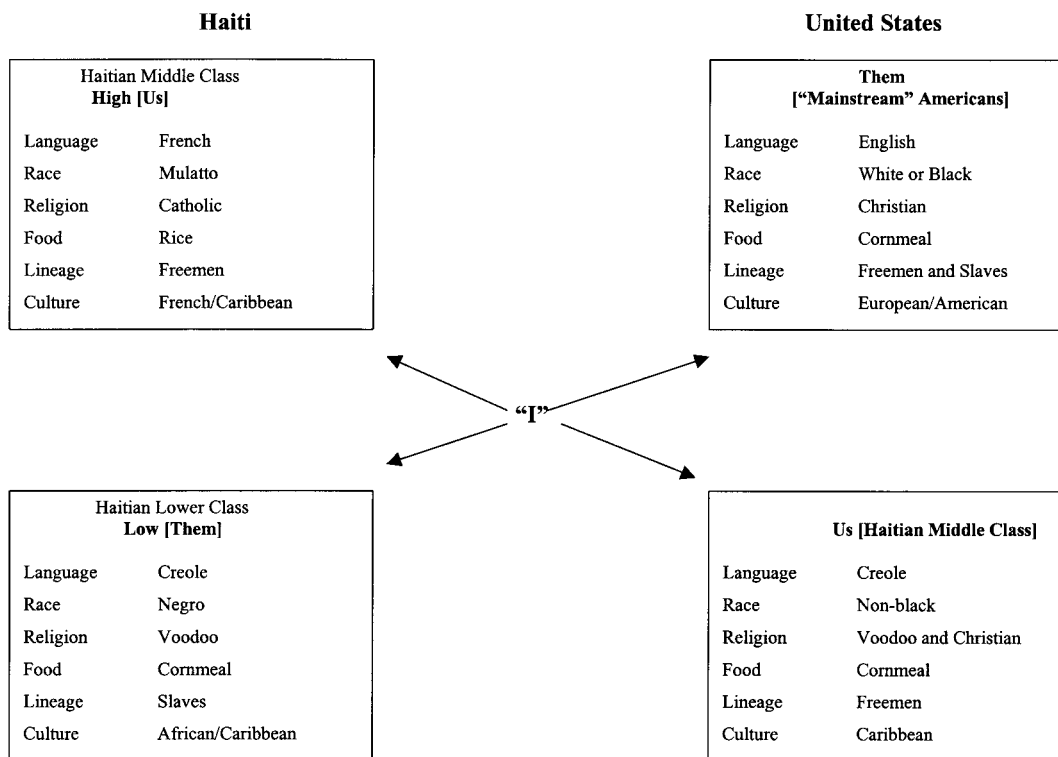
Questions of Class

As Laguerre claims, "Class consciousness defines the content and sets the boundaries within which variability in the manifestation and manipulation of ethnicity can be achieved" (1984, p. 28). The current study revealed that, besides shaping relations to Haitians and other Caribbean immigrants, class consciousness also defined the Haitian immigrant's relation to American culture. Class consciousness gave shape to the "countervailing forces of assimilation and differentiation" (Horowitz 1975, p. 118) forming group identity and boundaries. Furthermore, class identification and boundary formation is not fixed but fluid: informants kept shifting position up and down the social ladder depending on their frame of reference. "Creole is our language" seems contradictory because Odette claimed to identify with the Haitian francophone elite and systematically distanced herself from lower-class Haitians—"those people." In fact, Odette was code switching, moving between high and low categories as she negotiates multiple layers of her experience.

Horowitz (p. 119) calls this phenomenon "ascriptive identity." Highly contextual, ascriptive identity "embraces multiple levels or tiers, and it changes with the environment." All of the informants in the current study participate, to one degree or another, in ascriptive identity formation: as they move from one context to another in their daily lives, they must switch not only between speaking French, Creole, and English, but also between identification with the French colonial experience, Haitian folk culture, and American culture.

Ascriptive identity accounts for movement between groups, as well as for movement within groups. For example, Valdman (1975, pp. 66–72) points out that although only a small elite in Haiti practice French/Creole diglossia, even Creole speakers switch between various strains of Creole. He underscores the aspirational aspect of diglossia among speakers of Creole, who imitate Port-au-Prince speakers of so-called standard Creole to achieve higher status. Ironically, the middle generation rejects

FIGURE 1
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION VIA COMPETING CULTURAL CATEGORIES



their upper-class French culture and prefers to adapt the Creole folk culture of the lower classes.

Ethnic groups circle the wagons when threatened by another power, such as a colonial government (Horowitz, p. 136), so perhaps Odette uses Creole to maintain her ethnic difference from American culture, black or white, particularly at a time when the Haitian democracy movement seemed threatened by indifference from Washington and the rest of the world. Odette clearly identifies with the politics of her brother René, who runs a Haitian radio program devoted to popular Creole culture and political discussion. Ans (1987, pp. 301–313) explains that since the American occupation (1915–34), the Creolization of the bourgeoisie formed a means of resistance against imperialist intervention. Disparate sectors of Haitian society could unite around symbols of indigenous rural culture. René is no exception. His radio program, a sideline to his regular job as a middle manager, provides a channel for criticizing the American government and a rallying point for Haitian immigrants.

Interestingly, Odette's sister Edith, older by 14 years and a U.S. resident for an even longer period, as well as Odette's father- and mother-in-law, still speak Parisian French rather than Creole and reference France as their culture of origin. Unlike Odette, they attend Catholic church weekly and do not frequent Haitian festivals like the Mardi Gras Carnival. Creole is definitely not their

language. Members of the francophone elite, this generation (over 50 years old) came of age in Haiti before the Creolization movement and were less inclined to embrace Creole than their younger relatives who moved to the United States as children.

The Semantics of Race

The light color of their skin, their European education, and their French patronyms symbolize the privileged, middle-class origins of this group (Laguerre 1984, p. 30). Respondents were reticent when asked direct questions about racial and social differences among Haitians. In Leyburn's (1941, p. 3) Haiti, this topic was taboo. It must be stated, however, that Haitians, like many other Caribbean peoples, subdivide race into social categories described variously as "black," "colored," "mulatto," and "Negro." Odette was candid about racial identity and social status in the predominantly black democracy of Haiti: the lighter one's skin, the higher one's class. She also said her patronym, Girard, signaled her class difference from ordinary Creoles (she refused to say why, only saying that "those people" have "slave names"). Haitians descended from marriages between French colonists and slave women have French patronyms, while families descended directly from slaves tend to have makeshift family names such as Jean-Jacques—patro-

nyms constructed from place-names, sobriquets, and baptismal names. Such naming practices are in line with Dauzat's (1945, p. 180) findings that patronyms in eighteenth-century France symbolized civil status in European patriarchy, from which Jews, for instance, were excluded until Napoleon Bonaparte began enlisting Jews in his armies. Likewise, after Haitians defeated the French in 1805, slaves acquired civil status and took patronyms from a variety of sources. Although it goes without saying that last names are not an absolute marker for African lineage and that group boundaries are constantly in flux, names nonetheless form another cultural distinction between middle-class mulattoes and Haitians descended from African slaves alone.

In the present context, race is not a biological given but a cultural construct: black, brown, yellow, and white have no absolute meaning, but are entirely dependent on historical and social contexts for meaning. As Goldberg (1992, p. 505) points out, race, like ethnicity, is a socially constructed language. Just as the American flag means different things to different political and national groups, skin color is also subject to the nuances of political and cultural contexts. In "The Semantics of Race," Goldberg (1992, p. 555) observes that "race and ethnicity are rhetorical tendencies, not fixed conceptualizations. For, like race, ethnicity may be cast and managed as much in terms of inherent as deeply historical identities, either of which may be claimed as the basis of sedimented and immutable differences." In other words, the meaning of skin color and ethnicity changes as the social context changes.

United States public policy ignores the semiotic dimension of race and operates on assumptions of the biological determinism of skin color (Waters 1991, pp. 57–58). In a comparative study, Mittelberg and Waters (1992, p. 412) observe that Israeli immigrants enjoy more options than Haitians in forming a postimmigration identity, because "the primacy of race in American society" labels Haitians by a single attribute, skin color. Whereas in the United States the "one drop of Negro blood" policy lumps Odette and her servants together in a single category—that of African American—Odette and her sister distinguish themselves from the "colored people" that used to work in the kitchen back home. In a discussion with Odette and her sister Edith about turtle soup, a Haitian specialty, Odette said, "Only the colored people in my house knew how to prepare it." When probed, her sister answered, "Yes, only the servants knew how to cook it."

Since Haitians originate from a highly stratified, racially mixed, European-African-Amerindian-Caribbean culture, neither "home" nor "host" culture forms a single, coherent ethnic group. First of all, a "Caribbean American" label would be problematic, since all of the respondents in the study expressed superiority over other Caribbean immigrant groups, most notably Jamaicans, even though Haitians shop at the same ethnic market as Jamaicans. C. L. R. James (1963, p. 89) points out that social divisions between free blacks, mulattoes, and slaves

are deeply embedded in Haitian culture. At the time of the revolution, "the Mulattoes hated the black slaves because they were slaves and because they were black." Furthermore, Herskovitz (1937) observes that the concept of rank separating white, mulatto, and black has survived in Haiti in the twentieth century. In the United States, such class distinctions break down. Having enjoyed superior status in Haiti, middle-class mulattoes in the United States share the legacy of racial discrimination with African Americans. Furthermore, since Haitians of mixed descent do not view themselves as "colored," they do not enjoy solidarity with indigenous African-American culture either. Imagine their difficulty fitting into American society, black, white, or Caribbean. The effects of this dilemma are evident in the consumer behavior of the Haitian-American household under investigation.

The Meaning of Goods

Since Odette is a homemaker, much of the discussion turned on food shopping and preparation. The most obvious characteristic of food consumption in this household was its multiculturalism: depending on the occasion, Odette serves American meat and potatoes, ethnic dishes, or fast food. For the day-care children, consisting of whites, African Americans, and Hispanics (no other Haitians), she cooks regulation meals of meat and vegetables. For her own children she microwaves fast food for snacks, and for the family meals she cooks Haitian specialties.

The Thanksgiving meal, celebrated at the eldest sister Edith's house, illustrates Reilly and Wallendorf's (1987, p. 289) observations that "food consumption patterns are complex expressions of overlapping social group memberships." First of all, the very fact that the family routinely celebrates this particularly American holiday by loading the dinner table with turkey and other dishes on the last Thursday in November links them to the host culture. Furthermore, Edith's ties to French European culture, rather than the Creole identity forged by her younger siblings, are traced in the choice of wine, cheese, and the *crème brûlée* served at dessert. Finally, Edith points out that "no meal is complete without Haitian beans and rice." This dish, along with Caribbean yams and a side dish of cornmeal, is contributed by other family members.

The Thanksgiving meal also illustrates in a nutshell how consumption rituals construct culture while mending social discord (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991, p. 16). Food consumption forms the vehicle for this family to adapt to their new culture while honoring the traditions of home and the idiosyncracies of individual members. Rather than impose strict, universal codes of consumption on participants, claim Wallendorf and Arnould (p. 18), Thanksgiving invites them to perform "active negotiation" of variations on the codes. One of the Haitian teenagers in the current study provided a vivid example of active negotiation, blending Haitian and American traditions. He reported that at Thanksgiving his mother,

a recent immigrant, served a casserole of turkey, beans, and rice.

Such overlapping group memberships complicate the semiotic dimension of consumption described by Douglas and Isherwood (1979, p. 5), who claim that "goods make visible statements about the hierarchy of values to which their chooser subscribes." That is, that goods are symbols for cultural values. Since ethnic consumers might frame these visible statements within several different cultural contexts in any given discourse, the symbolism of goods is constantly in flux, highlighting the mutable and potentially ambiguous nature of semiosis in living culture.

Culture Shopping

The consumer behavior of Haitians in this study sheds light on current debates about the construction of consumer identity by means of the selection, purchase, and use of goods. As symbolic discourse invested with the wants, values, and drives of the consuming self (Levy 1981), consumer behavior forms a kind of mirror for the consumer. Researchers such as Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (Belk 1988; Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) have explored how consumers project themselves into possessions and consumption rituals and experience grief when such possessions and rituals are lost or replaced because of theft, fire, or change. Recent interpretive approaches to consumer research, including the work of Mick (1986), McCracken (1990), Wallendorf and Arnould (1991), and Hirschman and Holbrook (1992), begin with the premise that consumption constitutes a form of discourse, a road map of sorts for discovering deep, sometimes unconscious values and beliefs driving consumer behavior. Even brand-image research at the level of advertising is commonly driven by the assumption that brands must directly reflect the transcendent needs and wants of the target market.

Although, on the one hand, consumer behavior is a kind of mirror for the self, on the other hand, consumption also constructs the self: goods are objects to be loved, hated, and handled and contribute to the social and psychological formation of consumer and culture. It is thus a matter for debate whether goods simply mirror, extend, or identify an always and already complete self, or whether they in fact construct self, culture, and identity, as Venkatesh and others claim (1996, p. 43). The subject of consumption resembles a two-way mirror that both reflects and internalizes symbols of consumer culture, giving new meaning to the old adage, "You are what you eat." As Cushman explains, "culture is not indigenous clothing that covers the universal human; it infuses individuals, fundamentally shaping and forming them and how they conceive of themselves and the world" (1990, p. 601).

Firat (1996, p. 112) claims that in consumer culture the line between economics and culture has broken down because culture forms a system of signs that can be acquired in the marketplace: one can change identities as

he or she changes his or her external image. Since personal and social identity can be bought and sold, the human subject seems to have lost its authenticity. As Shields puts it, "A logic of identity is replaced by a more superficial, tactile logic of identification; individuals become more mask-like personae . . . with mutable selves" (1992, p. 16).

The drive to consume parallels the psychological drive to close an original lack in the self by making one's own the signs and symbols of consumer culture (Oswald 1996). In this scheme of things, speech, dress, food, and other forms of consumption not only mirror the self but construct and deconstruct the self as it repeatedly seeks an identity through things: being is contingent on consuming. Shields goes so far as to say that consumers cruise the malls to go "lifestyle shopping" (1992, p. 2), to acquire the outward signs of culture for lack of a more permanent inner identity.

Although it may be true that ethnicity can be bought, borrowed, and sold, it is not obvious that the kind of code switching observed among first-generation Haitians exemplifies lifestyle shopping. They display, rather, a kind of culture swapping, when code switching becomes the immigrant's means of negotiating the differences between two cultures. By celebrating her son's birthday twice, once at a fast-food chain with American children, then again at a barbecue with the family, Odette can both strengthen her son's ties to the host culture, on the one hand, and also maintain ties to her ethnic culture, on the other. Such observations about Haitians in America support Peñaloza's (1994) findings about Mexicans: immigrants adjust to American culture without completely assimilating or differentiating their cultural identity from the mainstream. Ethnic consumers "swap cultures" by swapping goods, moving between multiple worlds rather than blending these worlds into a single homogeneous identity.

Culture Swapping

Culture swapping in this way has broad implications for the semiotics of consumption. The ethnic experience underscores the difficulty of organizing the meaning of goods into the kind of consensus-building system that Douglas and Isherwood (1979) envision, since the meaning of goods shifts in relation to the ethnic subject's movement between two or more cultural frames of reference. For example, when Edith serves *crème brûlée* at the Thanksgiving feast, she not only shifts the frame of reference of the meal from here to there, from America to Haiti, but she is claiming her own ties to a fading French colonial experience in Haiti, in defiance of the populist, Creole ideals of her younger siblings. Structural semiotics fails to account for such instability, grounded as it is in the modernist assumption of a rational self that transcends racial, sexual, and cultural ambiguity. In what Silverstein (1996b, p. 284) calls the myth of a "monoglot Standard in America," advocates of an officially unified society or

nation-state interpret ethnicity as a moment in the eventual assimilation of difference into the mainstream.

Extending Peñaloza's (1994) claim that immigrants do not simply assimilate dominant culture over time but maintain transcultural identities to varying degrees, the current study reveals ways that Haitian consumers suspend and postpone assimilation indefinitely, straddling the boundaries between several cultures at once. As Appadurai (1990, p. 296) puts it, global consumer culture is a "complex, overlapping, disjunctive order" that eludes bifurcation into the dominant categories of mainstream and margin. Nor can it be contained within migration theories of "push and pull," or economic models of surpluses and deficits (balance of trade), or even within a neo-marxist dialectic joining consumers and producers. Global consumer culture deconstructs the dialectical opposition of the dominant culture and its others indefinitely, placing in question the very possibility of such concepts as dominant, mainstream, and original culture.

The Haitians in this study conform neither individually nor as a group to any one category: their consumer behavior is not entirely white, black, or Caribbean. Even members of the same family play out their ethnicity individually, depending on day-to-day encounters with the host culture. Odette's husband, for instance, hesitates to display his ethnicity on the job. As a store manager, he feels he must "be everything to everybody" and participate in the culture of the American owners who hired him. Moreover, coming from parents who so strictly identify with bourgeois French culture, he is much less enthusiastic about Creolization than his wife or brother-in-law.

The Meaning of Cornmeal

During a trip to a Caribbean produce market, Odette and I discussed the preparation of food staples such as beans, rice, and cornmeal. One conversation in particular provides insight into the conflicting meaning of goods resulting from the movement of reference between here and there, us and them, past and present. In the following transcribed conversation, for example, cornmeal is both sacred and profane, depending on whether the context is Haiti or the United States. The full transcription of this dialogue is included to highlight the dramatic, performative dimension of culture swapping. Here, verbal deixis serves as a semiotic model for the many nonverbal forms of code switching performed by immigrants, such as food preparation and shopping.

Odette and I discussed food in her kitchen, after shopping at a Caribbean market. Cornmeal, beans, and rice are staples. Cornmeal is discussed in particular. Odette said, "We cook it just like we cook the beans and rice. . . . When we make it separate we make a bean soup." Food preparation of beans, rice, and cornmeal is then discussed.

Odette: When I was back home I didn't like it because it was associated with . . . huh . . . um . . . I tell you,

once when we took my friend and I . . . we went back home and then had gone to see somebody but it was their dinner time and we . . . we don't do that [drop by uninvited at dinner time] and we walked in and they were having *that*, and it was, they said, "Oh my God, they saw us eating *that*," you know, that kind of attitude.

Researcher: Why, what's wrong with eating cornmeal?

Odette, obviously uncomfortable, laughs, hems and haws.

Odette: There's nothing wrong, its like, uh. Back there . . . um here I love it . . . but usually they would give it to the maids . . . or to the people who didn't have much money. . . . 'Cause it was cheap. It was cheaper to buy that than it is to buy rice, like that so, uh. . . . Strange, strange, strange.

Researcher: Back home, what would be an appropriate side dish?

She keeps up about cornmeal.

Odette: I mean you'd never serve that to somebody who comes to visit. I mean, unless it was . . .

Researcher: You'd serve it to your family members?

Odette: Here? Here we eat it all the time.

Researcher: In Haiti . . . plantain, meat, rice . . . cornmeal.

Odette: Everybody ate it, it's just that you wouldn't serve it to your guests . . . unless there was someone that requested it or something like that. . . . Somebody that you took to your house and said, "Guess what they fed me today? Cornmeal!" you know. Even though everybody loves it, don't get me wrong, everybody loves it but they would never admit to you that they love it. . . . To me, we gobble it up all the time but, . . . oh, I'll go home and "That's what they cooked today. Yeak! I don't want it, it's part of something, somewhere else. I don't want it," you know, that kind of thing.

Researcher: Even if it's just a side dish?

Odette: It's never done as a side dish. It's a main, it's *the* main dish. It's a part of the main meal. It's gotta be the main course. That, with the beans and the . . . it's not like . . . to us rice is a big thing. It's just that . . . this would take the place of the rice, instead.

Taken at face value, this interview suggests consumers do not always know what they mean or mean what they say. Cornmeal is bad, but also good. The pronoun "we" indicates both solidarity with Haitians living "there," the homeland, and "here," the United States. The slippery movement of the reference for "we" between these two cultural frames illustrates how group loyalty is constantly shifting in relation to the cultural categories for race, ethnicity, and social status to which the immigrant belongs.

The cornmeal interview highlights the kind of code switching Haitians engage in throughout the day. Close analysis of the cornmeal text reveals how shifts in the deictic context are responsible for the juggling act immigrants maintain to navigate several cultures at once. The speaker moves in and out of roles, moves between several different cultural frames, and moves between first-person narrative discourse and the dramatic representation of the speech of others. She consistently doubles references for

indexical pronouns including, “I,” “we,” “here,” and “there,” shifting imperceptibly between the present in America and her past in Haiti. Rather than assimilate here and there, us and them, now and then in a linear, single-voiced narrative, Odette systematically slips into a performative mode, either acting out parts by means of gestures or, more often, embedding the discourses of others in her own discourse (“we walked in and they said”). In almost the same breath, Odette used “we” to reference two different groups of people: “To me, we gobble it up all the time but, . . . oh, I’ll go home and ‘That’s what they cooked today. Yeak! I don’t want it, it’s part of something, somewhere else.’” Taken out of context, the words “we gobble it up all the time” and “I don’t want it” contradict each other. When framed within their respective cultural contexts, however, they make sense. This example illustrates the difficulty of segmenting ethnic markets into homogeneous groups, since at any given moment the ethnic consumer may be using goods to identify with either “here” or “there.”

In another interview, when Odette was discussing the family photo albums, including her wedding, she joins “here” and “there” in a single space by dramatizing a scene that might occur in Haiti between a Haitian girl, her Haitian-American boyfriend, and the girl’s parents. “If you brought your [Haitian] boyfriend home [to Haiti] and he did *this* [she puts her feet on the table], you couldn’t marry him. That person would be okay for here, but not there.” When asked why a couple living in the United States had to worry about the family back in Haiti, she answered that one could not marry someone “here” who would not fit in “there,” presumably because of one’s ongoing link to home. She said that if one’s boyfriend was an American, he would be excused, since Americans are not expected to know the same social rules as Haitians.

Code switching is an emerging theme in the ethnographic literature on cultures in contact. For example, Michael Silverstein (1996a) makes similar observations about the speech of an informant narrating the “winter bathing” ritual in Edward Sapir’s *Wishram Texts* (1909, pp. 188–191), which marks the young man’s rite of passage into manhood. The informant, Pete McGuff, straddles the border between traditional Indian culture and modern American culture. The shifting positions of what Silverstein calls the “perspectival center of deixis-within-the narrative” (p. 7) not only contribute to contradictions in the discourse but also symbolize the instability of the speaking subject standing at the crossroads of two or more cultures in contact, the old and the new. Silverstein (1996c, p. 272) goes so far as to say that the “indexical order” plays a fundamental role in social identity by joining multiple contexts and (micro/macro) levels in linguistic performance.

CONSUMPTION AS PERFORMANCE

The current study raises important questions about the validity of interpretive models being used to make sense

of consumer behavior. After a review of the literature on the symbolic dimension of consumption, a theory of performance will be set forth that accounts for the dynamic and mutable nature of meaning in the multicultural context.

Semiotics and Consumption

Geertz (1983, p. 5) and De Vos and Romanucci-Ross (1975) reiterate that ethnicity is foremost a symbolic activity. Language, customs, representations of the past, religious beliefs, a sense of common origin, rules of comportment, and behaviors that contrast with those of outsiders all symbolize boundaries of inclusion and exclusion between social groups, levels and modes of belonging, leadership modalities, and social identity.

To the extent that consumer culture is played out on the field of meaning rather than the field of supply and demand, semiotics, the science of signs, has become as important to consumer research as economic theory. In France, for instance, semiotic theory has informed projects ranging from redesigning the Paris metro to reinventing the Credit du Nord bank (Floch 1990).

Although semiotics actually embraces linguistics as well as nonverbal forms of expression, researchers such as Sapir (1949) in America and Barthes (1968) in France modeled the semiotic analysis of culture on language structure. More recently, Mick (1986, 1996) reviews the theoretical contributions of semiotics to consumer research, highlighting morphological features of advertising and consumer behavior as texts that can be organized into a coherent system. Based as it is on a logic of the linguistic sign, Mick’s semiotics falls short of explaining ethnic discourse, where contradictions between what the speaker means and what s/he says defy formal closure.

From Levi-Strauss (1973) to Douglas and Isherwood (1979) and even Geertz (1973), goods are the signifiers that make visible the signifieds, the categories of culture (Douglas and Isherwood 1979, p. 59). The categories themselves are taken for granted, as if they transcended the act of consumption as such.

Even recent developments in interpretive research, including psychological (Cohen 1989), semiotic, and anthropological approaches, perpetuate to some extent the ideal of a unified, rational subject of consumption. Belk (1988, p. 126) defends the notion of a transcendental “core” self, the “unextended self,” which is extended when consumers project themselves into their possessions. Consumer goods then form the “extended self.” McCracken (1990, p. 72), defines consumers and goods as “way stations of meaning” and cultural categories as “the conceptual grid” of the world of culture. “Cultural categories,” he states, “determine how this world will be segmented into discrete, intelligible parcels and how these parcels will be organized into a larger coherent system” (p. 74). Although McCracken describes the transitory nature of “meaning transfers” from culture to goods, he defines meaning production as the substantia-

tion of a cultural blueprint rather than as a tool forming culture itself. Therefore, McCracken's semiotics eludes questions of the culturally fragmented, ethnic self.

The same is true for structural and phenomenological interpretations of consumption. Levy (1981), for example, discusses consumer behavior as a textual system ordered by a rational and consistent consciousness. In the realm of phenomenology, Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1989) discuss the first-person view of consumer experience and research methods for outlining broad patterns of meaning that emerge from consumer interviews. The authors assume that consumption is driven by the rational and predictable choice of social beings determined to create meaning out of disorder. Calder and Tybout (1989) distinguish interpretive, qualitative, and scientific approaches on the basis of the relative abilities of these approaches to prove theory by empirical testing. The "traditional scientific empirical" (TSE) approach to consumer research teases out normative guidelines for predicting applicability of a theory. The TSE approach takes for granted a rational and systematic world order and a unified, transcendental subject of consumption (Calder and Tybout 1989, pp. 199–208). Ironically, symbolic-interpretive research perpetuates the logical worldview of the TSE approach by reading consumer behavior as a structural system generated by a transcendental consciousness.

Deconstructing Culture

Geertz (1973, p. 11) observed that the semiotic interpretation of culture runs the risk of "locking cultural analysis away from its proper object, the informal logic of actual life." For example, if one were to classify Haitian-American seasonal celebrations such as Carnival and Thanksgiving by means of binary oppositions of traditional foods such as goat meat and turkey, one might lose sight of the variety of different ways traditional foods are mixed and matched with other dishes, depending on who is coming to dinner (e.g., the turkey, beans, and rice casserole). Bourdieu (1977, p. 109) explains that individuals stretch and bend cultural expectations according to a logic of practical convenience. As a result, the only cultural categories that are clear and unproblematic exist as ideals in the mind of the observer, not in cultural practice (1972, pp. 1–71). He points out that even kinship, the backbone of the ethnographer's trade, has official and practical interpretations that render data incoherent and contradictory.

As Schouten and McAlexander point out, "In choosing how to spend their money and their time, people do not conform always or neatly to the ascribed analytic categories proffered by academia (e.g., ethnicity, gender, age, VALS.) They take part in the creation of their own categories" (1995, p. 43). It can be added that the moment a category emerges it slides into something else, eluding binary classification altogether. This radical challenge to the structural underpinnings of language, logic, and being

is at the core of Derrida's (1976, p. 149) notion of deconstruction and has important philosophical implications for the subject of consumption. As a means for symbolizing identity, status, and culture, the consumer behavior of immigrants follows the shifting modalities of cultures in contact, placing in question the metaphysical assumptions of structural semiotics.

A Semiotics of Performance

In the current framework, consumption constitutes not only a symbolic text but a kind of theatrical space in which the ethnic subject plays out personal and social identity. Although Wallendorf and Arnould (1988, p. 531) point out a theatrical dimension of consumption when they say that "objects serve as the set and props on the theatrical stage of our lives," and Deighton (1992, p. 362) claims that "a product is merely the frozen potential for performance," it could be said that the acquisition and use of commodities constitutes a form of performance, staging consumers (actors) in social rituals and contracts. This phenomenon can be theorized around a general semiotics of performance, a semiotics based not on the sign but on relations of subject-address and reference in discourse (see Oswald 1989, pp. 1–32). Here, as much emphasis would be placed on competing references for indexes such as we, us, here, and there in consumer discourse as on the symbolic dimension of goods such as cornmeal.

The Indexical Order of Goods

Performance entails a kind of staging of speakers—social actors—in the here and now of the communication event. Benveniste (1971, pp. 205–216) highlights the classical notion of deixis (narration) as opposed to the more familiar notion of mimesis (imitation) to account for this "staging." Unlike conventional signs, which signify transcendent meanings (the word "apple," e.g., conjures up the idea of the fruit for an anglophone without referring to a specific apple), indexes signify nothing so much as to anchor discourse in the pragmatic context or "real" of the speaking event.

Deixis has important implications for ethnic identity because it bears directly on problems of the coherence and intelligibility of ethnic discourse. If an informant, for instance, said, "This is my home," and the researcher failed to notice that she was pointing to a photograph of Haiti, the researcher might misunderstand and assume that "this" refers to the "here and now" of the interview, the house in the United States. However, even if the researcher noticed her pointing to the house in Haiti, one might wonder if the informant was lying or simply confused when she states, "This is my home," because Haiti refers to "then and there," not the present of "This . . . home." This example illustrates how switching between two contexts midstream in a speaking event threatens

the integrity (unity) of the speaker and the coherence of discourse.

Consumer goods function like indexes when they transcend their symbolic meaning and point to spatial and logical relations binding performers in the consumption ritual. Gift giving is a case in point. As Sherry, McGrath, and Levy (1992, 1995) point out, the circulation of gifts between sender and receiver and, in some cases, back to the store or another destination, is often more telling than the symbolism of the gift itself, although the symbolism of the gift may determine why it was purchased or returned. The gift articulates relations between several consumption contexts, including the purchase, as well as giving and receiving rituals. Furthermore, as Sherry et al. (1995) observe, self-gifts, rewards we indulge in for various reasons, articulate differences between parts of a self divided into both subject and object, giver and receiver, of the gift ritual. In other words, the mimetic function of goods (i.e., what they mean) works in tandem with the deictic function—how they shape social relations and personal identity in a given context. Thus, the goat meat found alongside the packaged foods in Odette's freezer is both a symbol for her ethnicity and also a physical link tracing the absent homeland in the current consumer context. As the meat is served to family and friends, it continues the chain of physical connectedness between past and present, maintaining old bonds and forging new ones.

Researchers often take for granted the spatial, deictic function of cultural symbols and focus on mimetic correspondences between behavior and meaning. Geertz (1973, p. 443), for example, interprets the Balinese cockfight as a symbolic abstraction of Balinese culture: "It catches up these themes—death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, chance—and, ordering them into an encompassing structure presents them in such a way as to throw into relief a particular view of their essential nature." By contrast, in the ethnic household the essential nature of things no sooner emerges than it shifts into something else: cultural symbols are not always what they seem to be. For example, Odette serves cornmeal even though she said, "We only serve cornmeal to the servants." She has a butchered goat in her freezer even though she says she is so mainstream as to reveal nothing about Haitian culture. And she speaks Creole even though she identifies with the francophone elite.

Such apparent contradictions on the level of the message can be explained in terms of a conflict between the meaning and reference of discourse, a conflict that occurs when goods as signs are moved out of their original context and dropped into a foreign one. In the unsettling business of migration, ethnic consumers use products to negotiate differences between home culture and host culture while forging an identity derived from those differences. In this sense, ethnicity is a kind of model for a postmodern interpretation of consumption, since the meaning of goods in the ethnic household has less to do with the "essential nature of things" (Geertz 1973, p.

443) than with the difficulty of fixing the essence of things and the identity of the consumer.

Culture as Commodity

As immigrants use goods to forge a new identity, they also wear their ethnicity as a kind of garment, a commodity that can be purchased, sold, discarded, or traded as the situation demands. In the process, ethnicity loses its anchor in living culture, becoming an accessory rather than a core element of the self.

Recent, postmodern advances in consumer research emphasize the fragmentation of the self (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), the collapse of traditional demographic categories such as age, race, and economic status (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) and the instability of brand symbolism (Willis 1991). At stake in a postmodern interpretation of consumption is the metaphysical foundation of structural semiotics and the assumption that what you see in consumer behavior is what you get. By extending the postmodern debate into the area of ethnic consumption, authors such as Costa and Bamosy (1996), Bouchet (1996), and Venkatesh (1996) look at ways consumers perform culture across the differences, segmenting markets by culture of origin.

Firat (1996, p. 107) points out that in postmodern consumer culture, ethnicity has been commodified, alienated from history, reified, and reduced to a set of symbols circulating on the global market and available to everyone. One does not have to come from Haiti to consume Caribbean foods, enjoy Caribbean music, and so on, since such products are available on the market. Thus, when Duvalier, encouraged by Haitian intellectuals, decided to nationalize Creole culture as an anti-imperialist move (Ans 1987, p. 315), he was commodifying the indigenous peasant culture. This meant isolating Creole culture from its social and historical roots in slavery and reducing it to a kind of brand image symbolized by language, voodoo, colorful clothing, and the slogan "Creole is our language." Reframing Costa and Bamosy's (1996, p. 12) example, "an individual consuming a cup of Turkish coffee with other Turkish immigrants is expressing ethnicity." But at what point does drinking Turkish coffee cease to be the direct expression of Turkish identity and become a symbol for exoticism, sophistication, or even alienation among Turks and non-Turks alike?

Ethnicity can also become a kind of packaging for marketing standard American culture (Willis 1991, p. 23). Even McDonald's, which set the standard worldwide for American fast-food culture, introduced so-called ethnic food items to the menu such as burritos with eggs and sausage by wrapping American fare in a Hispanic package.

Bouchet (1996) points out that in consumer culture the very notion of ethnicity differs from earlier concepts based on a dialectic of assimilation and differentiation, since ethnic consumption often has more to do with image than with reference to a social group. The semiotic order

of goods, rather than their strictly economic function, transcends national cultures, collapsing boundaries between the nation-state and its "others," and enables consumers to shop for ethnicity the way they shop for the latest fashion. Bouchet (1996, p. 73) calls consumers *bricoleurs* in as much as they piece together an identity in this way, without a map or structural grid. Second-generation immigrants, says Bouchet, are particularly apt to use consumption to forge a comfortable self-concept that differs both from their parents and from the mainstream. By emphasizing the role of individual choice in the construction of ethnic identity, Bouchet underscores the performative dimension of consumption, in contrast to Abner Cohen (1974, p. ix), who emphasizes the social dimension of ethnicity and the inevitability of ethnic identity imposed from without.

Although the outward effects of bricolage resemble the kind of culture swapping described in this article, culture swapping has less to do with the invention of an identity by second- and third-generation immigrants than with the ongoing adaptation and differentiation process of first-generation immigrants trying to find themselves in the new culture. Cornmeal tastes good, and since it loses its pejorative meaning in the United States, why not eat it? First-generation immigrants are likely to change gears in this way because they have literally moved from one culture to another and must negotiate conflicts between past and present lives.

First-generation immigrants are nonetheless affected by bricolage, however, to the extent that global consumer culture appropriates their ethnicity into mass consumer culture in the form of brands and lifestyle choices. This is the order of the simulacrum, as Baudrillard (1993, pp. 51–52) puts it, where the copy (the brand) becomes more real than the original and even places in question the very notion of an origin. In this order of things, the consumer drinking the famous cup of Turkish coffee might not be expressing ethnic origins so much as the alienation of Turkish ethnicity from living culture. Which leads back to the discussion of Odette's pastry business. By concealing her pastry making from outsiders, Odette might be protecting her trade, but she could also be shielding a family tradition from appropriation by consumer culture. But can she? Firat (1996, p. 120) questions the authenticity of all such traditions, asking, "Is a culture that ensures its livelihood through commodifying its qualities preserving what it originally was, or is it preserving something different from the original although resembling it in some respects? Is it at all possible to think of a stable or stagnant cultural identity?"

DISCUSSION: CONSUMPTION, IDENTITY, AND THE POSTMODERN CRITIQUE

What does this mean for the ethnic consumer or the consumer of ethnicity? Although Marx insisted on the

alienating effects of consumption and the commodity form, postmodern consumer research suggests how consumption can be liberating. Authors such as Firat and Venkatesh (1992) and Murray and Ozanne (1991) investigate ways in which consumers appropriate commodities in order to control their world and break out of the social constraints of status, ethnic group, or gender. It is almost to the extent that the signs and symbols of ethnicity circulate on the global market, transcending boundaries of class, race, and national cultures, that consumers incorporate these signs into their own personal identities.

As the current study demonstrates, immigrants negotiate differences between home and here by choosing when and where to wear their ethnicity. Laguerre (1984, p. 106) reports how Haitian immigrants use their ethnicity to their social and economic advantage: "Sometimes they identify with Afro-Americans; at other times it is wiser to put forth their Haitian origin." Odette's older sister Edith is another case in point. She claimed that affirmative action policies at the local school district helped her to secure her teaching job at a time when she might not otherwise have been employed. In contrast, she fiercely defends her difference from American black culture and white culture alike and stakes out her cultural territory by choosing a lifestyle in keeping with her French colonial upbringing.

Every Haitian interviewed in the current study claimed they would return to Haiti as soon as the political situation permitted. In fact, several years after the original study, Odette's brother René was spending half the year in Haiti in preparation to move there permanently. Rather than gradually erase difference in the interests of assimilation, Haitian Americans navigate an uneven path between both worlds, culture swapping as they go. The Haitians studied here used consumption both to hold onto their former, Haitian, identity and also to appropriate, albeit reluctantly, an American identity. In this sense, consumption could be called "liberatory." Further research into Haitian ethnicity might compare adaptability of first- and second-generation immigrants, compare real and potential upward mobility of Haitians at home and in the United States, or compare Haitians to other Caribbean immigrants in America such as Jamaicans and Puerto Ricans.

The Russian postformalist Bakhtin (1981, p. 315) might have called culture swapping a form of dialogic discourse. The dialogic imagination is liberatory inasmuch as it enables speakers to move between two or more voices in the same speech act and frees them from the limits of a single, monologic identity. Describing literary heteroglossia, when speakers borrow the discourse of others in representing themselves, he says, "Such forms open up the possibility of never having to define oneself in language, the possibility of translating one's own intentions from one linguistic system to another, . . . of saying 'I am me' in someone else's language, and in my own language, 'I am other'" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 315).

It is important to note, however, that Bakhtin would not go so far as to say that such doublings free human

speakers from discourses of authority, since one's core identity—personal, political, and cultural—is ultimately formed by mainstream, authoritative discourse. Censored by the Stalin regime for his radical views, Bakhtin writes, “Another's discourse performs here no longer as information, directions, rules, models and so forth—but strives rather to determine the very basis of our behavior” (1981, p. 342). In other words, to the extent that one internalizes discourses of authority, including marketing communication, as one's own, such discourses shape one's identity. The emancipatory dimension of culture swapping is thus a matter for debate. Marketing discourse performs as “internally persuasive discourse” (Bakhtin 1981, p. 342) driving consumer choice and branding consumer identity. This explains, as Peñaloza (1994, p. 33) observes, why marketing communication determines the immigrant's self-image as surely as the cultural baggage he or she brought from the home country.

To summarize, it is not clear to what extent the postmodern critique can actually liberate consumers or consumer culture from the dominant global forces. Moreover, it is a matter for debate whether the movement of immigrants between multiple worlds constitutes the kind of radical liberation of the postmodern subject discussed by Firat, Venkatesh, and others, since the phenomenon of cultures in contact has fostered dualities of every kind, engaging the subject in “non-linearities of thought and practice, improbable behaviors, contingencies and discontinuities” (Venkatesh 1996, p. 33) through the ages.

The postmodern critique nonetheless provides a framework for studying ethnic identity without an ideological horizon of assimilating or marginalizing ethnicity, since it draws attention to the role of cultural difference in the production of personal and social identity, to the role of margins in the very constitution of the dominant, to the role of the other in the production of mainstream culture.

CONCLUSION

Modernist interpretations of the “self-in-culture,” the social subject, as a dialectical synthesis of private and public self-presentations (Goffman 1959) fall short of explaining the reality of living culture and foreclose considerations of an ethnically divided self that eludes dialectical closure and coherent representation altogether. As Bakhtin pointed out in his critique of Russian Formalism, “Language as a stable system of normatively identical forms is merely a scientific abstraction, productive only in connection with certain particular practical and theoretical goals” (1986, p. 98). Consequently, attempts to assimilate the ethnic self into a one-dimensional “melting pot” ideology reduce cultural difference to more of the same and fail to address the difficulty of the question of personal and social identity among populations such as the United States, whose very mainstream is always and already plurivocal, polyglot, and multicultural.

By reorienting semiotics from the static sign to a dynamic of performance, this article provides a theoretical

framework for understanding the fluid and contradictory nature of ethnic consumption. The semiotics of performance accounts for apparent contradictions in consumer behavior by focusing on the ways consumers swap cultures as they forge a new, multicultural identity. Without reducing lived culture to theoretical abstraction (see Geertz 1973, pp. 24–25), the current study examined a Haitian-American household as a case study illustrating the benefits of the performative model for consumer research in general. It was necessary to weave ethnographic observation around theoretical debates in semiotics, politics, and consumer research in order to show how the epistemological ground of consumer research is shifting away from a monolithic, formalist paradigm for personal and social identity toward a polyvalent, postmodern paradigm.

The value of the performative model can be measured by its broader application to the study of consumer behavior in general. Increasingly, consumers participate in several often conflicting segments at once. Since each segment constitutes a type of subculture defined by the needs, values, and attitudes of consumers, such “segment hopping” resembles the culture swapping behavior of ethnic consumers. The performative model provides means of tracking the movement of consumers from one identity to another as they shop brands.

Researchers may, in the future, spend as much time identifying the different worlds crisscrossed by consumers as they do documenting these consumers' needs and desires. Moreover, as consumers move in and out of different segments, connections will have to be traced between a group's demographic identity and its identification with global brands such as Coca-Cola. They might ask, for instance, To what extent has global consumer culture intensified the territorial claims of cultures threatened by Western influence or completely erased those claims? As Benjamin Barber (1992, p. 53) puts it, “The tendencies of what I am here calling the forces of Jihad and the forces of McWorld operate with equal strength in opposite directions, the one driven by parochial hatreds, the other by universalizing markets, the one re-creating ancient subnational and ethnic borders from within, the other making national borders porous from without.”

I would not go so far as Barber (1996, p. 14) when he concludes that these conflicting claims spell the demise of democracy. However, I agree with Guttman (1992, p. 9) and Taylor (1992, p. 42) in that we take responsibility for realizing Enlightenment ideals of democracy to the extent that we train our minds to recognize and accept cultural difference as the foundation of human identity. Qualitative research methods, including ethnographic observation, on-site interviewing, and open-ended design are means of achieving this end.

In our increasingly multicultural world order, a world order shaped by the vast circulation of consumer goods beyond national and cultural borders, ethnicity is no longer an exception to a cultural norm but a model for the construction of consumer identity. Since the marketplace

forms a crossroads for multiple voices claiming a place on the stage of culture, the consuming subject is always and already pulled between personal and public claims on his or her attention; is always and already divided among his or her allegiances to self, culture, country, and the world at large.

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