

Reading Buffy and ‘Looking Proper’; Race, Gender, and Consumption Amongst West Indian Girls in Brooklyn

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Brooklyn’s first- and second-generation Black immigrants from the English-speaking Caribbean negotiate between West Indian and American definitions of race, ethnicity and gender.¹ This essay explores how West Indian adolescent girls, in particular, use cultural products such as music, fashion and television in forming their gender and ethnic identities. Tenuously positioned between the stages of childhood and adulthood, and between West Indian and American ideologies of identity, my informants also negotiated between competing and, at times, contradictory definitions of race and gender. While several scholars have argued that West Indian immigrants create transnational identities by maintaining political and social ties in their home and host countries (e.g. Basch 2001, Foner 2001), my own research has revealed that West Indian adolescents employ different ways of forming transnational identities. Unlike their mothers, who formed transnational identities by literally crossing national boundaries on a frequent basis, by taking part in the politics of their home and host countries, and by sending home remittances, my young informants formed transnational identities by consuming music, fashion and food from their home and host countries. Moreover, they did so as a way to act within and beyond American racial constructions.

Whether they claimed an affinity for Caribbean musical artists who were less well known in the U.S. (such as Spragga Benz), or mainstream American hip hop artists (such as Sean “P. Diddy” Combs), was often times symbolic of whether my informants, in any given situation, were asserting American or West Indian identities. These identity claims and consumption choices revolved around race, ethnicity and gender, and were negotiated in complex ways depending on many factors including the girls’ social settings. As such, the West Indian American adolescent girls among whom I conducted research consistently reinvented and reinterpreted the images and meanings of mass mediated products to suit their particular realities (Miller 1994, 2001). Thus, in

this essay I draw from theoretical literature on race, globalization, mass media and consumption to analyze the meanings attached to first- and second-generation West Indian girls' consumption of cultural products such as television programs, hip-hop music and fashion. In particular, I will explore the meanings surrounding my informants' consumption of the television program *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Buffy), along with the evaluations they made of particular female hip hop artists and the styles of dress associated with hip hop music as either "positive" or "negative," as windows into the processes by which they construct racial, ethnic, and gender identities for themselves.

The Fieldsite, Informants and Methodology

The ethnographic data I am drawing from is based on 20 months of fieldwork in the Flatbush and Crown Heights sections of Brooklyn, New York – the neighborhoods that house the largest population of West Indian immigrants in the United States (U.S. Census 2000).² These neighborhoods have been characterized as ghettos both by the largely minority communities that now live there and by the White ethnic groups whose exodus from the neighborhoods coincided with the influx of Black immigrants from the Caribbean. My informants alluded to factors such as the presence of Black poor and working-class families, what they saw as frequent police brutality against Black men, and the absence of movie theaters and Starbucks stores as evidence of the neighborhoods' ghetto status.

Caribbean products and services also serve to characterize the neighborhoods of Flatbush and Crown Heights (Kasinitz 1992, Foner 2001). While conducting my fieldwork I observed and heard accounts of a steady transportation of cultural products such as music, food, clothing, and audio/video equipment between the Caribbean and Flatbush and Crown Heights. Flatbush Avenue is a major shopping thoroughfare that represents the main artery of the neighborhood that bears its name, and the multitudinous stores along Flatbush Avenue are indicators of the neighborhood's class and ethnic composition. These stores include Caribbean and Korean grocery stores, Caribbean and Caribbean/American take-out eateries, ninety-nine cent shops, Caribbean record stores, Chinese restaurants and Latino-owned bodegas. A walking tour of Flatbush Avenue would also give one a sense of the institutions used by the neighborhood's immigrant communities. Such institutions include numerous churches of various denominations and languages (English, Haitian

French Creole and Spanish being the most present), ROTC recruitment sites and community gathering places such as the YMCA, where I conducted most of my research. While Flatbush and Crown Heights are clearly multiethnic neighborhoods, my own focus was on West Indian immigrants from the English-speaking Caribbean. Yet, I include in this work the responses and experiences of peers who were Latina and African American in order to contextualize and problematize the notion of ethnic identity categories as static. As I hope to illustrate when I introduce a Latina named Veronica, the Caribbeanization of Flatbush has resulted in a selective appropriation of West Indian-ness by individuals who may or may not be West Indian.

As my focus is on consumption, I approached my informants in institutions of leisure rather than at work or at school. I conducted repeated interviews with girls between the ages of twelve and seventeen who frequented two establishments: The Flatbush YMCA (YMCA) and The Brooklyn Children's Museum (BCM), which is located in Crown Heights. At the YMCA, I conducted interviews and participant observation with a group of 30 cheerleaders who practiced at the YMCA and cheered for its basketball team. Of these 30 girls, 25 were of West Indian descent. Of the remaining five girls, three were African American, and two were Latina. At the BCM, I conducted the same types of interviews with the adolescent girls who frequented the museum's after-school program. This program incorporated about 35 children between the ages of 7 through 18 years of age. The younger children received help with their homework from BCM's staff and from their older peers, and the older children (ages 15 and older) worked as guides in the museum. At BCM, I interviewed 18 girls, all of West Indian decent.

The girls' class backgrounds ranged from poor to lower-middle class, with most of them coming from working-class homes. When I began my fieldwork I found it difficult to identify my informants' class backgrounds. Their class status here in the U.S. seemed obvious at first glance: The girls' mothers often worked in service industry jobs – such as cashiers, housekeepers or hair-dressers – and more often than not, these women headed their households with little or no assistance from men. The girls' homes were cramped apartments in which they often shared bedrooms with numerous other siblings. And they attended public, predominantly minority schools that often had overcrowded classrooms, outdated textbooks and many children who took advantage of the free lunch and breakfast programs. All of these factors might seem to place

them in the working-class or poor segment of the U.S. population and it was factors such as these that my informants relied on in characterizing their neighborhoods as ghettos. However, since I was working with an immigrant group, I also tried to take my informants' class status "back home" into consideration, as well as the changing circumstances occasioned by their aspirations to social and economic mobility.

Mass-Mediated Culture: 'Buffy'

I was drawn to *Buffy* because, while it consistently renders Blacks as non-existent or peripheral, *Buffy* was immensely popular with the Black West Indian youth I studied in Brooklyn. I therefore became interested in the ways American constructions of race had come to influence how my informants viewed themselves in relation to the television programs they watched. I understand this as a dynamic process, and for this reason I present my informants as active, discriminating consumers who think critically about the products they consume rather than as passive victims of the culture industries.³ With the complex and more often than not derogatory representations of African Americans in mass culture in mind, I wondered what it meant for Black adolescent female West Indians to identify with a predominantly White television program like *Buffy*. Did it mean that my informants who identified with Buffy Summers (*Buffy's* White protagonist) were distancing themselves from African Americans?⁴ Were they denying their blackness? Were they obsessed with whiteness?

That Black youth should prefer to consume images and products which reflect "positive" representations of African Americans is a view held by the youth I studied as well as by their parents. Academics such as bell hooks and Michele Wallace have echoed this assertion, the latter referring to a now-famous study done in the 1950s by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark which argued that because Black children preferred to play with White dolls, and preferred to color pictures meant to represent themselves with white crayons, Black children suffered from damaged self-esteem at the hands of racism (hooks 1992, Wallace 1990a). Other scholars have taken steps towards problematizing the notions that buying products such as Black Barbie dolls necessarily represents more "positive" consumption and that youth are incapable of questioning "negative" products (duCille 1996, Chin 2001). Throughout their history in this country, and perhaps most visibly in the 1960s and 1970s with the civil rights movement, African Americans have consumed certain products

and boycotted others in acts of pride, resistance and protest. African American youth, in particular, have been instrumental in developing what I call an African American culture of consumption. They positioned themselves in relation to the consumption of cultural products, and at lunch counter sit-ins, public performances, and bus station rest areas, they demanded to have the same access to consumption that was enjoyed by their White peers. In doing so, these youth helped set the stage for current notions of identity politics – the notion that how one constructs one’s identity vis-à-vis consumption has political significance. Yet, because the politics of consumption are contingent, what I hope to contribute to an understanding of the formation of contemporary West Indian racial identities in the U.S. is a sense of how race is socially constructed in relation to specific popular cultural products, products that have social lives and should be studied within their particular social and historical contexts (Appadurai 1986, 1996).

Late twentieth century Brooklyn boasted a pervasive mass-mediated culture in which consumption was reflected in “‘emancipated signs’...which no longer have any fixed referent” (Baudrillard, quoted in Campbell 1995:99). Television programs such as *Buffy* exemplify this phenomenon. Sarah Michelle Geller is not only the protagonist on *Buffy*; she also stars in blockbuster teen-oriented films (*I Know What You Did Last Summer*, *Scream 2*, *Cruel Intentions* and *Scooby Doo*), and is a television and magazine spokesmodel for Maybelline cosmetics. *Buffy* itself was one of its network’s highest rated programs, garnering both critical adulation and a cult following, and although the program recently ceased production after seven seasons on the air, it continues to be broadcast in syndication. *Buffy* has also spawned an extensive popular cultural web with more than 320 unofficial websites devoted to the program, an internet fan club, and merchandise lines including a comic book series, licensed novels, and other teen-oriented products such as student planners, video games and calendars. Additionally, in 1999, The WB network introduced a *Buffy* spin-off series, *Angel*, which remains on the air and which chronicles the adventures of *Buffy*’s ex-boyfriend, a vampire with a human soul. In its final seasons of production the program moved to the UPN network and had a production budget of \$2.3 million per episode (The Hollywood Reporter, May 21, 2001). While I was conducting research, therefore, teen consumers were confronted by images of Sarah Michelle Geller at almost every turn, and almost every one of

the girls I interviewed at the YMCA and BCM said they watched and enjoyed the show.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer

When the program debuted in March of 1997, Buffy was a high school freshman moving with her divorced mother to Sunnydale – a fictional California suburb plagued by demonic forces because it exists on an ancient portal to Hell, a “Hellmouth” – to start a new life (she had burned down the gym in pursuit of vampires at her old school). While Buffy may have appeared to be a “normal” teenage girl, she was actually one of few “chosen ones” or “Slayers,” female teenagers with the ability to fight and slay vampires and other demons. Each episode of the program showcases Buffy’s physical strength, combat technique, and expertise with ancient weaponry such as stakes and crossbows. The general format of the program involves Buffy and her friends, including her “watcher” (a father figure/trainer in the form of a British librarian), discovering evil or supernatural wrongdoing perpetrated by vampires or demons. As each episode unfolds, Buffy and her cohort must defeat the vampires/evil doers and restore some semblance of peace to Sunnydale. In high school, Buffy’s special talents and duties as a Slayer often made fitting in difficult for her and continued to complicate Buffy’s life in college. On numerous occasions she was called upon not only to save the unwitting residents of Sunnydale, but also to save the entire world from demonic forces.

Buffy frequently had to lie to her mother who, until the third season, did not know Buffy was a vampire slayer. To complicate matters, Buffy fell in love with Angel, a vampire with a soul. Week after week, teenagers (along with preteens and adults) watched as Buffy went through “normal” rites of passage with a twist. For example, she lost her virginity to a vampire with a soul, who, upon experiencing the perfect happiness of their union, triggered the reversal of a Gypsy curse – magically and heartbreakingly transforming the vampire back into a remorseless beast. It is this aspect of irony and masked social commentary (here, girls learn that teen sex can ruin a relationship) that I think makes the series popular with the adolescents with whom I worked. I would hasten to add that what also makes Buffy appealing to teenage girls and adult academics alike is the program’s practice of flipping gender roles; the female heroine holds greater physical power and responsibility than any of the program’s other characters, including her male adult mentor. Additionally, the program

introduced a lesbian relationship into its subplot, when Buffy's best friend, Willow, began experimenting with witchcraft and sexuality during her sophomore year in college. Elements such as this same-sex relationship reveal the program's dialectical nature – it is both liberal and stereotypical in its characterization of the lesbian characters.

Representations of Blackness

While most of my informants were of African descent, the protagonist and all of *Buffy's* regular cast members are White.⁵ There have been instances when Black characters have appeared on the program (I counted five Black guest-starring actors in the first four seasons). These characters have often been represented as exotic others (examples include “Kendra,” a Black Slayer with a pseudo-Caribbean accent, Mr. Trick, a Black vampire who worked for the evil mayor and was killed by another slayer named Faith, and “the spirit of the first slayer,” the pre-historic, primitive creation-myth to whom Buffy traces her identity). True to Hollywood form (especially the horror genre), these few Black characters have all been either quickly killed off or otherwise written out of the regular story line.

While the program frequently makes clever allusions to popular culture, *Buffy* almost never makes reference to rap, hip-hop, or African American popular culture. While the rest of American youth culture seems to be obsessed with consuming Black cultural products – 70% of all hip hop albums are purchased by White youth (Kleinfeld 2000) – it is startling that *Buffy* renders Black youth culture almost completely invisible. The program has, however, periodically mined the culture and rituals of Africa for quasi-representations which support its science fiction story lines (examples include an episode in which Buffy's classmates become possessed by Masai warriors' practices and hyenas' instincts, a plot in which Buffy's mother falls prey to the evil forces attached to an African mask, and two seminal episodes in which Buffy confronts the Neanderthal-like spirit of the first slayer who is the source of Buffy's power and is played by a Black actress). When I asked my informants what they made of some of these episodes, instead of focusing on the derogatory images of Blacks on the show, they engaged in conversations about issues such as Buffy's fighting techniques and her ability to overcome hardships. Yet, *Buffy* did not exist in a televisual vacuum, and thus formed one part of a broader fictional universe through which West Indian youth negotiated their own identities.

When I asked Rebbie, whose mother and father are Black Jamaicans, to list her favorite TV shows she said, “Soaps, videos, *Fresh Prince*, *Martin*, *Seinfeld* – sometimes. *Moesha*, you know, ghetto shows. And *Buffy*.” In Rebbie’s list, *The Fresh Prince*, *Martin*, and *Moesha* were described as “ghetto shows” not because they took place in ghettos (in fact, *The Fresh Prince* portrays an upper-class Black family in Bel Air and *Moesha* depicts a middle-class Black family), but rather because they portrayed African Americans and were perceived as being appreciated by African Americans. To varying degrees these programs, regardless of their settings and the socio-economic backgrounds of their characters, also reproduced television’s conventional tropes of African Americans. Although these programs portray contradictory rather than completely stereotypical images of Black Americans, few Black sitcoms have been able to escape racial conventions that equate African American-ness with being poor or working-class and with stereotypical markers of race. Rebbie’s invocation of “ghetto,” then, sheds light on how constructions of race in America have come to shape how my informants saw themselves and the programs they watched. The programs she described as “ghetto shows” were also seen as such by other viewers and by industry insiders because they have been “ghettoized” on lesser networks. Predominantly Black programs such as *Moesha*, *Martin*, and more recently *The Bernie Mac Show*, *Eve* and *Girlfriends* air on the UPN, Fox and WB networks while the majority of predominantly White programs such as *Seinfeld*, *Friends* and *Frasier* originally aired on the primary networks, ABC, NBC and CBS.⁶

It is therefore significant that Rebbie chose to qualify and separate the two predominantly White programs she watched. For Rebbie it was important to say that she only watched *Seinfeld* “sometimes.” *Buffy* was added at the end, separately, but certainly not as an after thought. Rebbie was not my only informant to make a distinction between Black and White sitcoms. Keisha, a fifteen year old who emigrated from Trinidad when she was eight years old, listed *Party of Five* (which portrays a White family) as one of her favorite shows when I interviewed her alone. Yet, when I interviewed her again in the company of an African American friend, Keisha’s friend gasped when Keisha mentioned *Party of Five*. Keisha quickly lessened her appreciation saying, “Yeah, I watch [*Party*] sometimes.”

Keisha’s behavior evidenced a tension between race and ethnicity that was rooted in the particular positionality of my young West Indian informants.

Keisha's qualification of her tastes in the presence of her African-American friend signaled a reluctance to admit a preference for a product ostensibly geared toward Whites. As several scholars have pointed out, tensions between African Americans and Black West Indians have often led to mutual negative stereotyping and tenuous alliances between the two groups (Kasinitz 1992, Waters 1996b, Rogers 2001). One outcome of this stereotyping has been that West Indian youth who do not adopt African American slang, who think of school success as a gateway to social mobility and who do not actively stress their alliance with African Americans through the products they consume, are sometimes disparaged for "acting White." For the teenagers I studied, a primary method of either distancing themselves from, or allying themselves with African Americans was through selective consumption of products coded as White, African American, West Indian or West Indian and African American. I was therefore interested in the role of a predominantly White program like *Buffy* within my informants' consumption preferences and categories. Additionally, I pondered why my informants were not troubled by the negative images of Blacks on *Buffy*. Why didn't they see watching *Buffy* as a betrayal of racial and ethnic pride?

One of my informants, a thirteen year-old of Afro-Cuban and Puerto Rican descent named Veronica, found moments of pleasure and identification in programs such as *Buffy* and *Charmed* (another predominantly White program on the same network as *Buffy*, about three sisters who are witches). Veronica was one of a few girls of Latina rather than English-speaking Caribbean descent who frequented the YMCA. I found that her experiences shed light on the strong Anglophone Caribbean presence at the YMCA, and in Flatbush in general, because Veronica positioned her own ethnic identity within the context of Flatbush's Anglophone Caribbean community. Throughout our interview Veronica was very animated and spoke quickly and enthusiastically. She peppered her comments with slang terms and responded with good-natured sarcasm when I asked "dumb" questions. I asked her why she liked *Buffy* and *Charmed*:

Oh, 'cause I like witches. I like witchcraft and stuff. I really believe in that stuff. I even thought I was a witch one time.

Really?

Yeah. With some girls at my school. Because we all had the same mark on our arm. And we used to have these weird dreams. Yeah! We thought we were witches.

In the same interview, I asked Veronica about her favorite actresses:

Do you have any favorite actresses?

I liked Queen Latifah in *Set it Off*. And I liked the girls in *Soul Food*. I can't remember their names right now. One is Vanessa Williams. And all the other ones. I can't remember their names though.

I think Nia Long was in it.

Oh yeah, her and the other sister. I just can't remember their names.

Veronica's preference for *Buffy* and *Charmed* had to do with her specific interest in witchcraft and her identification not only with the witches on these programs but with her friends at school as well. But Veronica was also well aware of the importance of identifying with Black characters and Black celebrities. She named a host of celebrities whose images adorned the walls of her bedroom – all of whom were Black. Veronica spoke of these celebrities on a first name basis as if they were fictitious kin – a family of Blacks who had “made it.” She evoked the language of kinship again when speaking about the actresses in the predominantly Black film, *Soul Food*, calling them “sisters.” Queen Latifah's character in *Set It Off*, one of Veronica's favorites, was a Black lesbian bank robber. Though Veronica's identity politics were in part rooted in consuming images of empowered, unconventional, Black “sisters,” she also preferred White programs such as *Buffy* and *Charmed*, suggesting that her preferences, like her ethnic identity, were multi-layered and resisted categorization.

When I asked other girls why they enjoyed watching *Buffy* I found that like Rebbie and Veronica, they saw *Buffy* in a different light from other predominantly White programs. Shauna, a twelve year old from Jamaica whom I interviewed at BCM said she “like(s) it when Buffy kills vampires but she goes

through her own problems too.” Another informant, Andrea, said she liked *Buffy* “mostly because it’s different.” For Shauna, like most of the girls I met, *Buffy* was a superhuman character (she had supernatural strength and is adept in martial arts and combat fighting) with which they could identify because she had many of the same problems of regular teenagers (*Buffy* got poor grades, had trouble meeting boys, and worried about fitting in). I would posit, however, that a central reason my young informants so keenly identified with *Buffy* was because she, like them, was not a “regular” teenager. She, like the girls I interviewed, negotiated between two very different worlds. Similarly, *Buffy*’s day job – being an adolescent student – was complicated by the fact that she moonlighted as a slayer. *Buffy* did not choose her special calling; her dual identity was one she reluctantly negotiated. In fact, a central theme on the program is *Buffy*’s constant longing to live the life of a “normal” teenager.

The girls I interviewed also straddled class, gender and ethnic identities that were complex to say the least. Their worlds at home, with either one or two parents from the Caribbean, were in many ways very different from their realities in the world beyond their homes. Michelle, a thirteen year-old whose mother was from Harlem and father from St. Kitts, remarked, “I’m both (West Indian and American). I can’t consider myself all American.” As they negotiated these ethnic identifications, they also maneuvered between West Indian and American definitions of femininity. Girls like Rebbie felt it was unfair that they were expected to perform household labor, especially when their brothers were not required to do so. However, Rebbie rationalized that she “had to cook because in Jamaica the women stay home and cook.” Implicit in Rebbie’s statement was the notion that in America women were not expected to “stay home and cook.” Also implicit was the understanding that the ethnic identity to which Rebbie must conform at home was different from the identity she could assert outside of her home. Mary Waters has noted that West Indian adolescent girls living in Brooklyn also have less freedom to travel beyond their homes than their male siblings (1994a, 1996a), and indeed, my informants contended that West Indian parents were stricter in regards to how their daughters spent their time inside and outside the home when they compared themselves with their African American peers. The girls complained that their time at home was often spent doing homework and doing household chores such as washing clothes, cleaning and babysitting, and that unlike their American peers, their mothers felt they were too young to date. At the same time, my West Indian informants

also learned the workings of an African American culture of consumption from their peers and from the popular media. They saw that they could assert and circumvent both West Indian identities and White Americanness by valuing particular African-American cultural products. Considering their efforts to be both West Indian and American (and, especially, African-American), it was not surprising that these girls appreciated Buffy's special circumstances. However, television shows are not the only arena through which West Indian adolescent girls in Brooklyn negotiated ideas about gender, race, and ethnicity. Shows like *Buffy* existed within a broader popular cultural sphere that included music as a dominant and dynamic referent for identity formation. Hip hop, especially, came to index struggles over what it meant to be an American, an African-American, a West Indian immigrant, and a young woman.

Hip Hop, Positivity, and "Looking Proper"

The cheerleaders I met at the Flatbush YMCA were not the "typical" American cheerleaders we see in films and on television. Their cheers asserted that they were neither blond nor obsessed with being thin, but instead that they were tough girls from Flatbush. Nevertheless, three or four of my informants' mothers came to watch every cheerleading practice.⁷ I learned from the mothers that they came because they were ambivalent about allowing their daughters to participate in cheerleading because they felt there was not enough adult supervision at the YMCA, that their daughters were in too close proximity with the predominantly male basketball team (for whom they cheered), and that the hip hop music the cheerleaders danced to was "a bad influence." I also learned that the mothers felt that their primary duties as moms were to police their young daughters' access to sex and sexually explicit material. The mothers' main concern was shielding their daughters from teenage pregnancy and from sexually transmitted diseases. With their sexually explicit lyrical content, the hip hop songs to which the girls practiced were viewed as just as potentially dangerous as the boys who vied for the girls' attention.

My informants' mothers' views of hip hop suggest that cultural products understood as African American in origin were granted lower status than cultural products thought of as West Indian. Moreover, where hip hop lyrics were seen as inappropriate, the equally explicit lyrics of West Indian dancehall artists like Lady Saw escaped criticism from the mothers who frequented the YMCA. The mothers' hesitancy to allow their daughters to practice cheerleading

to hip hop and their desire to shield their daughters from the opposite sex, then, were both informed by American popular constructions of race and gender which equate consuming hip hop music and being sexually active as an adolescent with “ghetto-ness” and “Blackness.” Therefore racial and gender meanings attached to my informants acts of leisure and consumption were negotiated with trepidation both on the part of my informants and their mothers.

When I asked one mother, who gave birth to her daughter when she was still a teenager, if her daughter listened to sexually explicit music at home, she told me the following:

She listens to this song by Jay-Z [an African American rapper] [and when I heard] the uncut version of the song. I was like, ‘we’re going to have to discuss this song.’ Because I want to know, does she really know what the words to the song are? Listen, I know when I got out the house I was listening to whatever I could listen to. I’m funny about what she listens to...The stuff is sexual...some people may think I’m obsessed with it but I’m really scared about it because...When I got pregnant with her, that was like the worse thing that could have happened – is me becoming pregnant. Now, the worse thing is you can get AIDS...So it’s no joke. I watch my daughter.

This mother’s fears echo the very real dangers faced by girls coming of age today. Significantly, this mother perceived a connection between the problem of adolescent pregnancy and two other social problems, AIDS and sexually explicit rap lyrics. The connections she made between adolescent pregnancy and explicit musical lyrics is a connection that has also been made by moral guardians (such as Tipper and Al Gore) and academics (such as Mary Pipher), and is one that positions girls’ consumption of popular culture as a corrupting influence. Not surprisingly, the girls tended to view things a little differently.

While both the youth and the adults at the YMCA utilized a “positive” versus “negative” framework for interpreting consumption and leisure, the girls and adults implemented the model in different ways. For the girls, there was an acknowledgement that certain female hip hop performers were “negative” because they promoted female promiscuity, and that others were “positive” because they either connoted respectable femininity or female independence

from males. Leisure activities were placed on a value scale in which “positive” was code for Caribbean, Black (when opposed to White), respectable, and I would argue, middle-class. On this same scale, acts of leisure and consumption that were described as “negative” were more often traceable to African American origins, were indicative of female promiscuity or male violence, and were ascribed to poor or working-class values. In this framework hip hop artists like Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown were “negative” role models because they were seen to promote wanton sexuality, conspicuous consumption and “ghetto fabulous” styles. For example, when I asked Chandra her opinion of Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown, she curtly responded, “They’re hookers.” I hasten to add that the girls were also aware that musical artists promote images that are designed to sell records. The following quote from Foxy Brown is a self-characterization in relation to some of the girls’ other favorites and illustrates that Brown herself adopts a framework similar to the girls’:

Everybody has their gimmick. Lauryn (Hill) is very positive. Missy (Elliot) and Da Brat are sorta’ fun and hardcore. Then you have Foxy, who is like, sex. I don’t think my shit is a gimmick—I think it’s real. It’s what I am. Every woman has a Foxy Brown in her, meaning just that bad bitch who ain’t takin no shit. But if someone thinks it’s a gimmick, you know what my motto is? ‘Just gimme my check’ [Laughs] (quoted in Rolling Stone 1998).

Hip hop artists such as Lauryn Hill and Missy Elliot were seen by the girls as “positive” due to Hill’s middle-class respectability and her successful appropriation of West Indian-ness and Elliot’s androgyny and independence. Veronica, for example, had this to say about Missy Elliot:

She can sing and she can rap and she has nice lyrics. In one of her songs she says she don’t make no boy walk all over her – if you want her, you gotta’ look for her. She don’t look for no boy.

However, while the girls argued that Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown were “bad role models,” they surreptitiously derived pleasure from these artists and only selectively distanced themselves from these performers. For example, when I asked two of the YMCA cheerleaders, Andrea and Cheryl (best friends who I

interviewed together), if they liked they way Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown dress they said the following:

Cheryl: I like the way they dress – but I wouldn't dress in it.

Andrea: Yeah, that ain't my style of clothes.

While in this instant Cheryl and Andrea shunned the notion of wearing sexually provocative clothing, I found that for them and the other girls, styles of dress had much to do with the absence or presence of adult supervision. On a number of occasions I discovered that girls had left their home in conservative or “respectable” clothes, only to change into far more racy outfits after they arrived at the YMCA. In their valuations of rappers like L'il Kim and Foxy Brown, then, the girls oscillated between “looking proper” and finding pleasure in sexualized styles. Thus, the girls used performers like Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Missy Elliot and Lauryn Hill as gauges to negotiate “respectable,” “positive,” and racier roles for themselves, a process that invoked behavioral expectations that were gendered, ethnicized, and classed.

This dynamic self-fashioning was exemplified one night when I observed a Youth Leaders Club meeting at the Flatbush YMCA. Ten boys and eight girls between the ages of eleven and seventeen attended the meeting that evening. While one of the youngsters in attendance was African American, the rest were all first- or second-generation West Indians or were Caribbean immigrants from Barbados, Trinidad, St. Lucia, Guyana and Haiti. The adolescents in attendance that night were dressed very much like all of the youth who frequented the YMCA. The boys wore baggy jeans, Tommy Hilfiger T-shirts and basketball tank tops. While the Leaders Club President wore a conservative white shirt and black pants, the other girls wore jeans and “baby T-shirts” with single words such as “Angel,” “Hottie” and the brand name “Baby Phat” (a label designed by the wife of hip hop mogul Russell Simmons) written in rhinestones across the chest.

The president of the club, a 16 year-old Trinidadian girl named Astride ran the meeting with order and precision. One of the issues discussed was a YMCA fundraising mission in which the Leaders Club participated. The members planned to visit the businesses along Flatbush Avenue, a busy shopping thoroughfare, to solicit donations. Astride instructed the members on how to dress while fundraising:

Look proper when fundraising. Guys, no pants with the butts hanging out. No mini-skirts and halter tops for the girls. Look proper! People put up a face in Leaders Club – I don't know how you dress when you're not here.

What was most significant about Astride's instructions is that she maintained that it was important for both males and females to refrain from revealing attire. Here, she seemed to be contesting the sexual double standard. Yet the dress she condemned as inappropriate (baggy jeans, with one's behind exposed for boys and halter tops and mini-skirts for girls) were the styles most popular with Flatbush's African American, working-class, and poor youth.

The low-hanging baggy-jeans Astride described have come to symbolize "inner-city" Black, hip hop fans. A popular urban legend is that low-hanging, baggy jeans originated on New York's Rikers Island, North America's largest penal colony. The legend goes that the predominantly African American and Latino inmates at Rikers Island, prohibited from owning belts, wore their prison uniform trousers low, with their behinds partially exposed in acts of resistance against prison dress codes. Whether this legend is true or is an urban myth is less important than the common understanding that baggy, low-hanging jeans are indicative of a particular racial and class status – Black and poor, working-class, or criminal. Baggy, low-hanging jeans are also now markers of the distinctive material style of hip hop consumers and performers. Astride was therefore not only influenced by Caribbean values of respectability, she was also cajoling the Leaders Club members to distance themselves from their African American poor and working-class peers. Gender and ethnicity were therefore identities that were constructed in relation to popular cultural products coded as African American, as Caribbean and as American.

Conclusion: Theorizing "Positive/Negative" Consumption

For the youth who frequented the Flatbush YMCA and the Brooklyn Children's Museum, West Indian and African American identities could be asserted and circumvented through the appropriation of hip hop and dancehall music. Moreover, girls of Caribbean descent used cultural products to negotiate between West Indian and American gender expectations. The lines between West Indian, American, and African American identities, however, are

sometimes blurred and at other times made prominent, and the coexistence and intermingling of West Indian and African American cultural products such as food, music and fashion in Flatbush contributes to this ambiguity. By watching *Buffy*, my informants found moments of pleasure, even empowerment. They also came to understand that being Black in the United States often means that one is, at best, rendered invisible. And while they grappled with the “negative” images presented by African American artists such as Foxy Brown and ‘Lil Kim, neither my adolescent informants nor their mothers saw the consumption of a similar genre of West Indian musical products as “negative.” Rather, they saw consuming West Indian products as “positive” because it asserted their West Indian identities.

These paradoxes in my informants’ processes of meaning-making speak to the contradictions inherent in notions of “positive” versus “negative” consumption, notions that beg deconstruction. In “Negative/Positive Images,” Michelle Wallace’s introduction to *Invisibility Blues*, she discusses this framework as it relates to the controversy surrounding Black feminist writers’ “negative” portrayals of Black men. “Significantly,” Wallace writes, “I have become convinced that the binary opposition of ‘negative’ versus ‘positive’ images often sets the limits of Afro-American cultural criticism” (Wallace 1990b:1). Wallace goes on to argue:

The negative/positive schema discourages us from looking at Afro-American mass popular culture from the crucial perspectives of production and audience reception. Who produces Afro-American mass culture, how and for what audience? Can this information be used to distinguish Afro-American popular culture from mass culture? Is the distinction viable? Moreover, how does black audience reception affect the production of mass culture...What relationship do questions of consumption and commodification have to the viability of an Afro-American oppositional avantgarde or the potential for continuing or amplifying Afro-American practices of cultural resistance? (Wallace 1990b: 3-4).

While Wallace asks these questions in the context of African American cultural production and consumption, her queries also relate to West Indian American consumption. Considered from the crucial perspective of my

informants, notions of “positive/negative” consumption are destabilized and problematized. Recall that while many of my informants characterized artists such as Foxy Brown and ‘Lil Kim as “negative,” these same artists were nonetheless listened to, and their styles of dress were appropriated to varying degrees. Moreover, their identification with characters such as Buffy Summers and performers such as Missy Elliot and Lauryn Hill, as well as the lesbian bank robber Queen Latifah portrayed in the film *Set It Off*, demonstrates that girls interpreted certain unconventional images of femininity as “positive” – physically and emotionally strong women who were independent of men and who exemplified talent and creativity.

Wallace’s questions can also be extended to consider how Black audiences interpret products that are not produced by Blacks. My informants’ consumption of *Buffy* exposes the contradictory and complex nature of “positive” consumption because they made distinctions between predominantly Black programs (which they usually read as “positive”) and predominantly White programs (usually read as “negative”). Still, the vast majority of them received pleasure from viewing *Buffy* – a predominantly White show – precisely because, like them, it was “different.” Regardless of the races of its cast members, *Buffy* held a nebulous role between “positive” and “negative” and perhaps even between “Black show” and “White show.” As Wallace suggests, binary conceptions of “positive” versus “negative” consumption can serve to essentialize Black consumers’ identity politics by taking only one aspect of consumption into account while ignoring the complex nature of identity formation. Indeed, the girls among whom I conducted research revealed not only that consumers make real use of mass mediated images, but also that those meanings meet and interact with each other in an interdiscursive space between what Angela McRobbie calls different, youthful, subjectivities (McRobbie 1994).

Unpacking notions of “positive” versus “negative” consumption and exploring young peoples’ efforts to consume “positively” emphasizes consumer agency. Seeing youth consumption, in particular, as a complex act of meaning making, demonstrates that viewers are able to create their own, unexpected, alternative meanings that can counter hegemonic ideologies (Fiske 1987,1991, Hall 1997). Whatever their preference, whether it was for West Indian dancehall musicians such as Lady Saw, “good girl” personae such as Lauryn Hill, “ghetto fabulous” rappers such as Foxy Brown, or White supernatural characters such as

Buffy, my informants demonstrated that they thought about the products and images they consumed. The cheerleaders at the Flatbush YMCA and the girls who frequented the Brooklyn Children's Museum positioned their favorite songs, styles, and television programs within larger discourses of race, ethnicity and gender. Clearly, we must complicate our notions of consuming "positively" and problematize our interpretations of "what it means to be Black in the United States."

Paul Gilroy has argued that media such as television, music, sports and fashion share common origins that feed the same uncertainties about race (Gilroy 2000: 23).

Bodies may still be the most significant determinants in fixing the social optics of "race," but black bodies are now being seen – figured and imaged – differently. Thanks to Adobe Photoshop and similar image-processing technologies, skin tones can be more readily manipulated than the indelibly marked musculatures that sell the sweated and branded products of Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Timberland, and Guess in the glossy pages of publications like *Vibe* and *The Source* that trade widely in aspects of black culture but are not primarily addressed to any particular black reading public. This crisis has ensured that racialized bodies represented as objects – objects among other objects – are never going to be enough to guarantee that racial differences remain what they were when everyone on both sides of the line between white and colored knew what "*race*" was supposed to be (Gilroy 2000: 23, my italics).

For the young first- and second-generation West Indian girls with whom I worked, *Buffy* and other popular cultural products helped to depict not only what race was supposed to be, but also what they were supposed to be. By identifying as both West Indian and American, my informants performed complex maneuvers that could not be reduced to whether they consumed Black, White, West Indian or African American products. Rather, they extracted what they could utilize positively and questioned those products they saw as undermining their identities.

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Notes

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² It is difficult to say precisely how many West Indians reside in Brooklyn due to the limited documentation on illegal immigrants. However, the 2000 Current Population Survey indicates that there are over 700,000 persons of Caribbean origin living in New York City.

³ The notion that youth are thoughtful consumers rather than cultural dopes is one that has been contentiously debated within media scholarship (Pipher 1994, McRobbie 1994, 1999, Best, 2000, Chin 2001).

⁴ New York's West Indian immigrants have had a history of both forming alliances with and distancing themselves from African Americans in relation to political activism (Watkins-Owens 1996, 2001; Rogers 2000) and in school and work settings (Waters 1994a, 1994b, 1999).

⁵ There is one Black cast member on *Angel*; the *Buffy* spin-off series that debuted after my fieldwork was completed. Additionally, in a peripheral but recurring role, a Black actor played the principal of Sunnydale high school in the sixth season of *Buffy* that also aired after my fieldwork was completed.

⁶ This is both a racial and an age-based ghettoization of programs; the WB, UPN and Fox networks are also the carriers for most of the youth-oriented programming including *Buffy*, *Felicity*, *Dawson's Creek*, *Party of Five*, and more recently *Gilmore Girls*, *Smallville* and *The OC*.

⁷ Unlike the cheerleaders' mothers, the parents of the girls who frequented the museum's after-school program did not find it necessary to watch over their daughters during time spent at the museum. The museum's more intellectual and, one could argue, middle-class image (although frequented by working-class youth), was not questioned by parents.