Marcel Rosa-Salas

Total Market American

— Race, Data & Advertising

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RACE, DATA, AND ADVERTISING

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INTRODUCTION / THE AMERICAN ADVERTISING INDUSTRY'S RACIAL INFORMATION SYSTEM

Just a few months shy of my twenty-first birthday, I began an internship at Dímelo, a Madison Avenue advertising agency specializing in marketing to US Hispanic consumers.[1] On my first day, I got to sit in on a meeting with a European alcohol company that was finalizing the Spanish-language copy for its American grocery store promotional displays. The campaign was targeting a market segment the brand referred to as the "Hispanic consumer of the world." Annie, an account executive I was shadowing for the day, muted the call and elaborated to me that the target market was a "worldly, cosmopolitan type of Hispanic." I jotted down the phrase, intrigued to learn more about the characteristics that made a Hispanic "worldly" and wondered if I might be considered one.

Later that afternoon, I observed a brainstorming session for a Japanese automobile company that wanted to "reposition" or change how Hispanic men in the United States viewed its midsize sedans. The small conference room we sat in was dimly lit by the soft glow of a cloudy gray sky heavy with impending snowfall. As I stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows waiting for the meeting to begin, an offhand comment by the account director sparked the inspiration for this book.

"We know this consumer isn't your typical, white, general market consumer," he said. No one in the room questioned him or asked for clarification; I figured everyone knew this as well. As a college intern hoping to make a good impression on my first day, I didn't ask either. I hurriedly scrawled "White people = general market" in my notebook.

Going into the internship, I knew that advertising's primary goal was to capture attention and influence behavior to drive profits for companies. But

at Dímelo, I witnessed firsthand the myriad ways the advertising industry acts as both a reflection and catalyst of entrenched notions about racial difference that circulate in wider American society. The account director's passing comment—"White people = general market"—revealed to me the core premise of an entire business sector known as "multicultural marketing."

Multicultural marketing describes an ecosystem of advertising agencies, brand marketing departments, consumer research firms, data companies, and consultancies dedicated to investigating and influencing the spending patterns, product choices, media preferences, and emotions of people racialized as Hispanic, Asian, and Black in the United States.[2] This industry is premised on the idea that by learning about and appealing to the presumably distinct cultural identities and behaviors of each of these groups, advertisers can better communicate the value of their products and services and foster a positive brand perception that ultimately leads to sales and profit. Multicultural marketing is rooted in an epistemology of race as a natural and stable trait that produces measurable differences believed to directly impact human behavior and cultural practices on a collective level.

Advertisers, agencies, and media companies have historically viewed the American buying public as racially divided into a "multicultural market" and a "general market," which has long presumed a white majority in the US population. However, the US Census Bureau's forecasts of racial demographic change, coupled with technological shifts wrought by the digital advertising boom, are sparking discussions about advertising business practices and terminology.[3] Advertisers in fields from banking to fast food, packaged goods, and the automotive industry are considering racially targeted marketing strategies as the path of the future. Marc Pritchard, the chief brand officer of Procter & Gamble, one of the world's largest consumer packaged goods companies, affirmed that in the United States, "multicultural marketing may be the single biggest source of market growth in our industry now and for the next several years, perhaps even decades" (figure I.1).[4] *Total Market American* explores the US advertising industry's role in the cultural production and commercialization of racial difference in a context of demographic shifts, political change, and digital transformation.

I situate this book at the intersection of scholarship that examines the cultural production of American racial classifications, consumer culture, and the politics of knowledge. Scholars have previously explored the marketing industry's enduring role in producing and promoting notions of American national identity that reflect and refract classed, gendered,
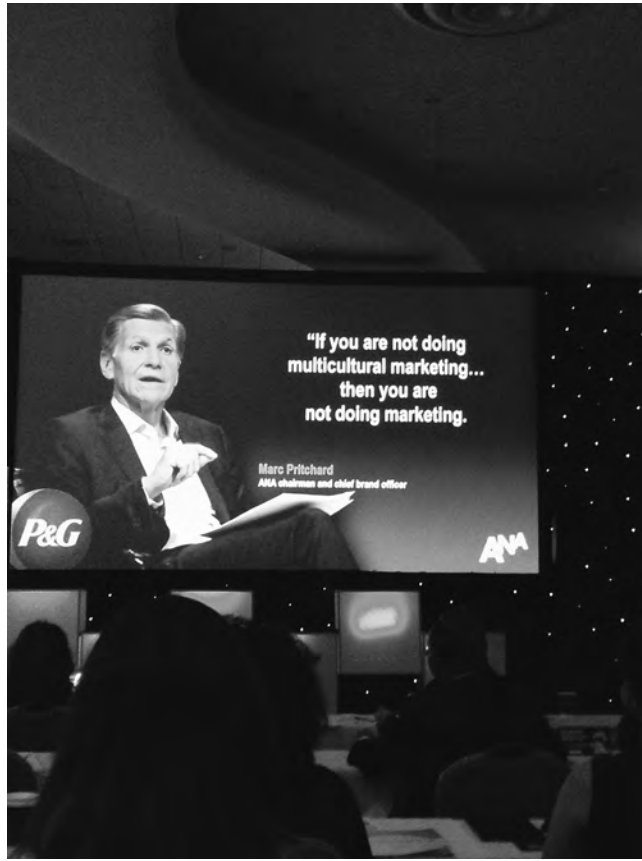
I.1 Marc Pritchard, Procter & Gamble's chief brand officer, speaks at the 2018 Association of National Advertisers (ANA) Multicultural Marketing and Diversity Conference, stating: "If you are not doing multicultural marketing . . . then you are not doing marketing." Miami, Florida. Photo by the author.

and racialized social hierarchies.[5] Communication studies theorists have explored how American consumer culture, retail experiences, and market segmentation practices[6] contribute to the social reproduction of group identities.[7]

Multicultural marketing in the United States is the focus of pivotal works by cultural anthropologists Arlene Dávila and Shalini Shankar who have respectively provided deep ethnographic analyses of the Hispanic and Asian American advertising sectors.[8] Both of their studies document the central place of race in contemporary US advertising practices

and chart how political shifts in immigration policy and census classifications, along with the social and cultural changes they create, have influenced the establishment of US multicultural advertising as a business sector. Dávila particularly highlights the critical role of market research and audience measurement in legitimizing Hispanic advertising as a business and in shaping the cultural politics of the Hispanic classification in the United States more broadly.[9] Shankar explores how multicultural advertising agencies frame Asian Americans as a distinct and desirable consumer group within the broader narrative of diversity as the "new normal" in a demographically changing nation.[10] *Total Market American* expands on these and other works by focusing specifically on the American advertising industry's practices of producing and circulating racial theories of populations and personhood, particularly through the role of advertising strategy and other modes of knowledge production, which are designed to help advertisers predict and persuade people for profit.

Motivated by the need to understand the "consumer" and maintain demand for products and services in a capitalist economy, the advertising industry prioritizes specialized expertise that rationalizes and thus "facilitate[s] greater predictability and control" over human beings.[11] Professionals with titles like "brand strategist" and "media planner" play pivotal roles in this ecosystem. Their approaches combine psychology, anthropology, statistics, and data analysis to theorize about and anticipate consumer behaviors, equipping their brand clients with information to aid in—as one ad agency put it at an industry conference presentation—"connect[ing] Black consumers to ads" (figure I.2). The expertise these professionals generate leads to the classification and objectification of human populations into consumer segments that are transacted upon within the advertising industry, branded with designated labels such as "Black millennials" and the "Hispanic market," whose existence is concretized through practices of market research, quantification, and measurement.[12]

With this book, I show how the US advertising industry's twin goals of consumer insight and control lead to the reproduction of ideas that normalize an understanding of race—not as a political mechanism of social division rooted in structural racism, but rather as an inherent, measurable trait inscribed in the body and believed to directly influence culture, psychology, temperament, and purchasing behavior. As part and parcel of racism as a system of power, the production of racial knowledge has been ongoing for centuries, spanning domains such as academia, government, and large corporations. This process of racial knowledge

I.2 A slide of racial statistics presented by a multicultural advertising agency making claims about "what connects Black consumers to ads." Presented at the 2018 ANA Multicultural Marketing and Diversity Conference, Miami, Florida. Photo by the author.

production is intrinsically tied to classification systems, which function as a means of exerting power and control over human populations.[13]

Within the American advertising industry, I refer to this phenomenon as its *racial information system*, which encompasses the practices, personnel, technologies, assumptions, and institutions that generate and leverage racial ideas of human difference to tailor and optimize marketing strategies for corporations. Racial information systems of US advertising function at multiple levels, from marketing departments within brands producing race-targeted campaigns to advertising strategists at multicultural agencies

analyzing data from consumer research software to come up with branding concepts to pitch to a creative team. This system also entails statistics extrapolated from market research reports and the racialized surveillance involved in targeted digital advertising.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at multicultural advertising agencies in New York City, interviews with nearly one hundred industry professionals, and participant observation at key industry events, *Total Market American* shows how the American advertising industry is engaged not only in promoting products and services but also in the business of race itself.

"LEADING WITH ETHNIC INSIGHTS": US ADVERTISING AND THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF RACIAL THEORIES

On an August afternoon in 2016, I had lunch at a glossy hotel restaurant in the Soho neighborhood of New York City with Sarah, a marketing executive at a global fast-food chain. After learning about Sarah's career trajectory and her decade-long tenure as an African American executive in food marketing, I asked her to describe her current employer's primary consumer base in the United States. "On a national level, our consumers are divided into GM [general market], AACM [African American consumer market], ACM [Asian consumer market], and Hispanic." Sarah noted that the chain hires different advertising agencies to produce tailored campaigns for each racial market. "The GM agency identifies the broad target and the multicultural agencies identify specific differences with multicultural consumers. When we say 'general market,' we are supposed to mean anybody coming into the marketplace, but our actions are to the white consumer," Sarah stated wryly while nodding and taking a sip of her coffee, letting me know that at that moment she was being "unfiltered."

Sarah explained that after developing and launching a new chicken sandwich over the course of a year, the Hispanic marketing consultants she worked with doubted the prospects of the new menu item's success with Spanish-speaking Latinos: "They told us buttermilk doesn't mean anything to the Hispanic consumer." As a reminder that the marketing of products as mundane as chicken sandwiches is shaped by racialized notions of cultural identity packaged as consequential business insight, Sarah explained that the consultants had also warned her that Hispanics wouldn't be able to pronounce the word *buttermilk*.

Sarah's explanation of multicultural marketing industry dynamics matched what I had learned about the largest companies in the space. For example, McDonald's is widely recognized as a brand leader in American multicultural marketing and has been celebrated within industry circles as a pioneer in creating ad campaign strategies and consumer research studies about the tastes, behaviors, and desires of Americans racialized as "multicultural." As early as 1971, the restaurant chain expanded its footprint into Black urban neighborhoods after hiring two Chicago-based marketing companies specializing in reaching Black consumers: Burrell Communications to handle the production of its advertising and the market research company ViewPoint to conduct ethnographic studies, taste tests, and focus groups to develop new menu items intended to attract Black diners.[14] In subsequent decades, McDonald's has expanded its multicultural marketing efforts to include advertising campaigns and product development for Hispanics and Asian Americans as discrete target markets.

"The ethnic consumer tends to set trends, so they help set the tone for how we enter the marketplace," stated Neil Golden, McDonald's former US chief marketing officer in 2010.[15] Golden's assertion was informed by his experience spearheading one of the company's successful Hispanic marketing efforts—the "Fiesta Menu"—which launched at select McDonald's locations in southern California in the year 2000. The offering featured Mexican-inspired cuisine like guacamole and tortas and was a tremendous success not only in Hispanic-dominated neighborhoods but also in majority white locales like Laguna Beach.

"[The Fiesta Menu] over performed in the general market," Golden gushed to reporters.[16] The Fiesta Menu's success inspired McDonald's to formalize "Leading with Ethnic Insights," a marketing strategy that involves the company investing in market research about the behaviors and attitudes of different racial populations, all in efforts to persuade them to eat at McDonald's and ultimately to drive growth in all market segments.[17] "If we're doing nine focus groups," Golden explained at a multicultural marketing conference, "two will be Hispanic, two will be Afro-American, and two will be Asian. It's the best way for us to develop the deepest insight in the products we're offering."[18]

"Ethnic insights" into the coffee preferences of different racial markets prompted McDonald's to launch targeted beverage offerings. The company's research purported that Asian Americans typically prefer "sophisticated" espresso-based drinks while African Americans are drawn to "luxuriant coffee flavor combinations."[19] In 2019, the brand launched its

largest Black-targeted marketing campaign in over a decade, titled "Black & Positively Golden" (figure I.3). Described in a press release as "a new campaign movement designed to uplift communities and inspire excellence," the initiative included advertising across media channels, event sponsorships, and the establishment of a scholarship fund.[20] By 2020, amid a noticeable sales decline among younger African Americans, Morgan Flatley, McDonald's chief marketing officer, emphasized in a company memo the importance of racially targeted marketing expertise in the company's branding moving forward. "We need to make sure we are looking through the lens of our operators, our crew, and our people to better connect with African-American youth as we go forward."[21]

McDonald's investment in "ethnic insights" exemplifies how racial theorizing informs the market segmentation strategies of some of the world's biggest corporations. Market segmentation is a commercially oriented practice of human classification that "involves the transformation of social groups, loosely organized around contingent identifying characteristics, into consumer niches, where those characteristics are assumed to be stable, measurable, and powerful in predicting consumer behavior."[22] Multicultural marketing operates on the assumption that race is a definitive human trait that can be used to divide populations into smaller, distinct subgroups: It treats race as a marker indicative of shared group-level cultural behavior, psychology, emotional disposition, media habits, and purchasing patterns—traits that can be observed, measured, analyzed, and strategically leveraged by marketers and brands for economic gain.

From colonization and the transatlantic slave trade to neoliberal narratives that frame diversity as a driver of market growth, capitalism in the United States remains inseparably linked to racism as a system of power[23] and along with it, particular theories about what it means to be a human being.[24] Racial categories were created as frameworks to legitimize economic and social oppression, shaping a racially stratified political order. Racism relies on the production of *racial knowledge*. Philosopher David Theo Goldberg defines this as the making of difference through knowledge production as a means of exerting power. This power operates through the "dual practices of naming and evaluating" populations based on perceived racial distinctions.[25]

Racial knowledge is constructed and sustained through discourse, or the narratives and representations created and circulated by people and across institutions.[26] From academia and the legal system to big business, racial knowledge has been central to American governance—producing

I.3 Advertisement from McDonald's Black & Positively Golden campaign, launched in 2019 and produced by Burrell Communications.

and circulating information about so-called "racial nature . . . about character and culture, history and traditions . . . about the limits of the Other's possibilities."[27] Data collection rituals like the US Census play a critical role in codifying and institutionalizing racial meaning over time, establishing certain classifications while phasing out others. The legal system further reinforces these categories through laws and policies that differentiate and discriminate, particularly in areas like citizenship, legal protections, and resource allocation, often based on perceived racial identities. Meanwhile, media shapes cultural and social perceptions of racialized groups, crafting representations that both reflect and influence attitudes and subjective understandings of race, self, and other.

Racism involves categorizing people "in the name of economic survival or in the name of economic well-being," fed by the epistemological manufacture of racial knowledge.[28] This knowledge is a fundamental mechanism in the social management of life under US capitalism, where racialized personhood is something perceived as natural, universal, and inherent—a fact of life rather than a product of power. Racial knowledge shapes how the state classifies us, how we understand social belonging, and—as this book explores—how corporations construct markets and influence public perception of goods and services.

Theories of racial difference underpin many of the persuasive techniques used in consumer culture. In a competitive marketplace, where companies invest heavily in understanding and predicting consumer behavior, theories of racial difference are both marketing tools and targets, leveraged to feed capitalist growth. US advertising's manufacture and measurement of racial markets underscores the longstanding role that knowledge production has had to play in legitimizing and naturalizing racial difference for economic gain.[29]

In the eighteenth century, the rise of Enlightenment ideals—centered on scientific measurement, objectivity, and classification—gave racial knowledge production significant traction. Influential figures in governments across Europe and North America, along with leading academics, publicly asserted that Africans were inherently inferior and naturally suited for enslavement. These assertions were far from incidental. They served to solidify political hierarchies that became the foundation of the colonies' social and economic systems, colonial violence, and chattel slavery.

Enlightenment thinkers expanded on earlier notions of human differences, theorizing that distinctions based on observable traits such as skin color, hair texture, and other physical features corresponded to inherent psy-

chological and social qualities, which they believed were inscribed in the body and mind and expressed in behavior.[30] Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, often referred to as the father of modern taxonomy, introduced a widely adopted theory of human classification in his popular 1735 work *Systema Naturae*.[31] Like many of his naturalist contemporaries, Linnaeus's perception of human populations around the world were drawn from the writings of travelers, traders, missionaries, and plantation owners who had encountered a diversity of people in the New World.[32] His classification system divided humans into four main varieties that associated physical traits like skin color and hair texture with moral, cultural, and temperamental dispositions.[33] *Homo sapiens europaeus* was described as light-skinned and muscular with flowing blonde hair and blue eyes, characterized as gentle, inventive, and governed by laws. *Homo sapiens asiaticus* was sallow-skinned with dark hair and eyes, characterized as severe, haughty, and governed by opinions. *Homo sapiens americanus* was copper-colored with black, straight hair and wide nostrils and described as stubborn, content, and governed by customs. And *Homo sapiens afer* was described as black-skinned with curly hair and thick lips and characterized as crafty, lazy, and governed by caprice. Linnaean typologies, considered a beacon of scientific expertise, laid the groundwork for the belief that racial classifications reflect an inherent essence—an underlying sameness presumed to be shared by all members of a given racial category.[34]

Such theories linking perceived racial appearance to an essential and deeper biological and cultural behavior have been reinforced over time with lasting impact. Nineteenth-century proponents of scientific racism, like physician Samuel Morton, popularized craniometry (the measurement of skulls) to claim that not only were there racial differences in skull size but that these differences correlated with intelligence and moral characteristics. Morton, who was a believer in polygenism (or the idea that racial groups evolved separately and did not share a common ancestor) argued that the "Caucasian race" had the largest brains and were therefore intellectually superior while the "Ethiopian race" had smaller skulls but were "joyous, flexible, and indolent."[35] These racially typological notions of personhood gained wide acceptance, influencing academic and political spheres, and were institutionalized in the epistemologies of American governance through US Census enumeration practices and segregation policies.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a parallel statistical paradigm emerged focused on the reification of supposed racial types through quantitative measurement.[36] The rise of the US eugenics movement saw statistical knowledge produced and used to legitimize racist theories of

intelligence, health, and criminality.[37] Anthropology, a discipline deeply intertwined with the European and American colonial enterprise, faced internal debates and contradictions regarding racial theories.[38]

The mid-twentieth century witnessed a partial retreat from scientific racism, driven by the global denunciation of Nazi Germany, and then later, the progress of the civil rights movement, and the momentum of decolonial struggles. Advancements in genetics have since shown that racialized populations are neither genetically homogeneous nor distinct. [39] As political constructs shaped by history and context, racial categories are inherently fluid, making race an unreliable scientific basis for establishing rigid boundaries between groups.[40]

Yet the belief that one's race determines moral, spiritual, intellectual, and behavioral traits remains deeply embedded in US society.[41] This assumption manifests across various domains: from popular journalism attributing Black athleticism to genetics to the pharmaceutical industry's pursuit of race-based medicines, to the media's reliance on political polling that treats racial categories as fixed predictors of shared behaviors and beliefs—reinforced by concepts like "the Black vote" or "the Hispanic vote."[42] Scientific racism is also experiencing a twenty-first-century resurgence, now rebranded under the moniker "human biodiversity" and gaining traction in academic journals, research networks, and foundations.[43] The revival of racial essentialist knowledge production aligns with rising global anxieties over demographic shifts and the proliferation of anti-immigrant policies in the United States and beyond.[44]

Indeed, the cultural practices that are often perceived as "racial" are, in reality, products of history and policy. They reflect how a US society shaped by racism often dictates where we live—through residential and school segregation—how we are classified, and who we interact with. These political factors contribute to the development of shared sociocultural practices at the population level. Furthermore, racialized cultural traits are not static and are always contextually specific, informed by geography, class, migration patterns, and historical inequalities, resulting in significant diversity within racialized groups. This diversity challenges essentialist understandings of race and culture, and shows that racialized cultural traits are shaped by social and political structures rather than biological determinism.

However, as historians Evelynn Hammonds and Rebecca Herzig observe, persistent "differentiation, segmentation, and segregation of bodies along racial lines" are "acquiring novel forms of social and financial investment."[45] Advertising is one of the institutions that contributes to imbuing racial cate-

gories with meaning and salience. Brands like McDonald's, noting declining interest among Hispanic consumers, launched music-oriented marketing campaigns that celebrated the "optimism *inherent* in Latino culture," as mentioned in the company's 2021 global diversity, equity, and inclusion report.[46] In 2024, PepsiCo's market research division published a report, which, among other racial theories about Hispanics, presented an infographic for the "Circle of Joy," the "virtuous cycle" of Hispanic "togetherness" that "fuels the large family gatherings . . . [and] fuel[s] a life of laughter, warmth and belonging," which ultimately "drives and sustains growth in food & beverage" industries (figure I.4).[47] Market research firm Kantar advertises itself to brands as "helping clients grow via inclusion," selling syndicated survey research on "topics of cultural importance to Hispanics and other high-growth populations" (figure I.5). This type of commercial racial expertise is regularly purchased and used by advertisers and agencies to inform market predictions, shape sales strategies, and guide product development. Commercial motivations for racial theorizing are embedded within American advertising's racial information system, serving both as "active creators of categories as well as simulators of existing" racial categories.[48] These marketing research notions, which echo eighteenth-century Linnaean typologies, claim that race correlates with group-level temperament and disposition, suggesting measurable markers of difference between groups.

Advertising industry knowledge-production practices—such as audience research, media planning, and advertising strategy—are embedded within a broader, historically entrenched system of racial knowledge production that spans academic, legal, and state institutions, all operating in an American society still deeply structured by racism. The advertising industry's production and use of racial knowledge is not isolated; it is part of this long-standing epistemological ecosystem that shapes and sustains racialized understandings of humanity, linking those ideas of difference to notions of economic value, American citizenship, and national belonging.

THE RISE OF AMERICAN RACIALLY TARGETED ADVERTISING

Since its very beginnings, US consumer culture has been a site of racial knowledge production and meaning making.[49] During the colonial period, advertisements in newspapers and other public forums promoted the sale, capture, and return of enslaved African laborers, reflecting and reinforcing racialized power dynamics.[50] As modern advertising developed in the
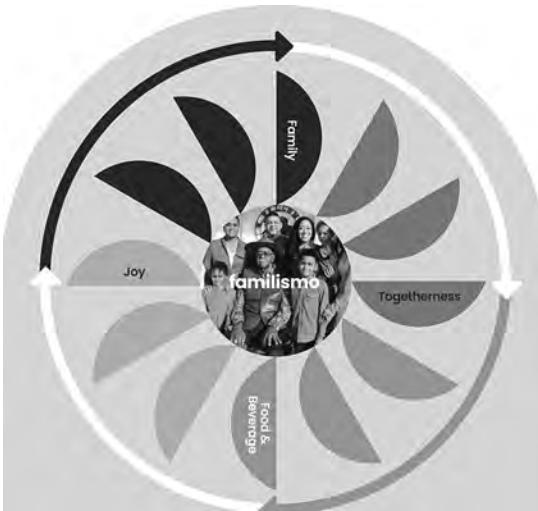
I.4 A data visualization from PepsiCo's 2024 report, published by its Data and Insight division, illustrating the "Circle of Joy"—a racial theory of Hispanic family dynamics. From Pepviz, *Circle of Joy.*

I.5 Market research company Kantar professes to help advertisers "grow via inclusion." Kantar, 2023.

late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, racism became a visual tool for promoting consumer goods on a national scale.[51] Evidenced by the massive and long-standing popularity of brands like Aunt Jemima, a key element of these early marketing strategies was a type of "commodity racism,"[52] or what bell hooks once referred to as "eating the other"—the exploitation of non-white racial and ethnic representations to attract white consumer attention and evoke pleasure.[53]

The racial segregation policies codified by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision were pivotal in shaping the US advertising and media industry's business structure, division of labor, and ways of envisioning the nation as a marketplace.[54] For much of the twentieth century, advertising in mass media predominantly catered to white consumers, often using demeaning imagery of non-whites in marketing messages. However, as millions of Black Americans migrated from the rural South to urban centers seeking economic opportunities and refuge from racial violence, companies started to recognize the potential of the "Negro market."[55] By the period between World War II and through the 1960s, advertising agencies began to hire Black employees in "special markets" divisions to focus on Black consumers. The advertising agency J. Walter Thompson's Seven-Up ads reflected this segregated organization of American society and its effect on the business structure and practices of mid-century advertising and media industries. Assuming that replacing white models with Black ones would suffice in attracting Black consumers, Seven-Up placed these advertisements in the Black-oriented publication *Ebony* magazine, as opposed to a mass-market title like the *Saturday Evening Post*, where the ad featuring exclusively white models was placed (figures I.6 and I.7).

Yet, in the wake of social movements of the 1960s, the enterprise of racially targeted advertising expanded. On college campuses across the United States, student activists representing Black liberation, Chicano nationalism, Asian American Yellow Power, and Indigenous sovereignty repudiated civil rights–era liberal emphases on reform and integration, in favor of a politics of multiculturalism that decentered white hegemony and emphasized representation, recognition, and the virtue of cultural distinctiveness as a basis for activism and political solidarity.[56] Such "assertions of minority difference," as Roderick Ferguson puts it, were soon absorbed by institutions such as universities, philanthropies, and corporations, with the federal government using multiculturalism as a racial discourse to serve its own agendas, particularly in the upholding of US capitalist imperialism.[57]

I.6 and I.7 Two Seven-Up advertisements from 1960 reveal the racial segregation prevalent in mid-century American advertising. Both ads feature identical creative elements, including the tagline "Boys like girls who make Seven-Up 'Floats,'" but are produced in separate versions: one featuring white models, the other Black models. Ads created by J. Walter Thompson Company. Source: David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

Boys like girls who make Seven-Up "Floats"

What every young girl should know is this: *Nobody* can resist a 7-Up "Float"! Want to see? Put a scoop of *his* favorite ice cream or sherbet in a tall glass. Tilt the glass, and pour chilled, sparkling 7-Up gently down the side. The fresh, clean taste of 7-Up works a special magic with ice cream. And don't forget a 7-Up "Float" for yourself! P.S. Boys like 7-Up—girls like 7-Up—for regular thirst-quenching, too. Take home a case of 7-Up so you'll have plenty on hand. You like it . . . it likes you!

Copyright 1960 by The Seven-Up Company

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This advertisement appears in:

A parallel changing tide in the U.S. advertising industry at this time saw leaders embracing the antiestablishment ethos of youth-led student movements, which inspired a "creative revolution" in corporate management philosophy.[58] This new vanguard of ad industry leaders wanted to distance themselves from the staid mid-century values of mass society conformity and instead embraced a renegade spirit of flexibility and individuality. In the post-Fordist era, capitalism began telling a different story to the public, drawing on symbols and the multicultural politics of difference from student movements, suggesting that consumers could "participat[e] in revolutions that did not antagonize capital but presumed it."[59]

As the economy transitioned from Keynesian economics to a hypersegmented, neoliberal one characterized by market deregulation, privatization, and globalization, consumerism became further ideologically engrained as a path to self-fulfillment and social belonging. Technological advancements in media distribution, including the rise of cable television, along with the use of computers, enabled companies to gather and cluster increasing amounts of consumer data into a seemingly endless combination of niche market segments.[60] The advertising industry's objective to integrate their clients' brands into personal identities while capitalizing on societal trends became evident through the adoption of multicultural discourse in American consumer culture. By the 1990s, this shift, spurred by changes in immigration policies that led to an influx of people from Latin America and Asia, gave rise to the multicultural advertising industry. Distinct racial marketing agencies emerged, where different racial populations were treated as market niches outside of the mainstream. This shift gave rise to a racial information system of agencies, practices, personnel, technologies, assumptions, and institutions that construct and leverage racial concepts of human difference to optimize marketing strategies. Indigenous American people have largely been excluded from this system, as their perceived market size and lower incomes are deemed insufficient to warrant inclusion in the broader racial biopolitics of consumer segmentation by national advertisers.

Multicultural marketing has long served as an entry point for nonwhite professionals to establish themselves in the predominantly white and elite American advertising industry. Paradoxically, while capitalism has historically exploited racial differences for profit, the sustained commodification of racial expertise in US advertising is neither guaranteed nor easily secured. Multicultural marketers must continually advocate for the recognition of their specialized knowledge and the economic potential

of the populations they represent. Although incorporating racialized "diverse" populations into consumer culture may seem like an economically rational choice, the marginalization of multicultural marketing expertise highlights the enduring power of racial ideologies that devalue people of color—even when such inclusion could drive financial success. The racial reckoning of 2020—sparked by George Floyd's murder and the global protests that followed—compelled corporations to pledge billions toward racial justice initiatives. This period also saw a surge in commitments to multicultural marketing, only to be swiftly curtailed following Donald Trump's second election to the presidency.[61]

Total Market American sheds light on US advertising's pivotal role in the ever-shifting, ambivalent, and politically charged production of racial knowledge about what it means to be human and American.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

This book shares my ethnographic insights across five chapters. Chapter 1, "The 'General Market': On the Commercial Construction of American Whiteness," explores the "general market" category in US advertising discourse and its role in establishing and maintaining a consumerism-centered definition of American whiteness as the standard national identity. Although seemingly race neutral, this industry term operates as a racial construct within American advertising's racial information system, reflecting and reinforcing ideologies of white normativity that imply white people of economic means are the default standard against which all other racial groups are measured as valuable consumers. The distinction between the "general market" and "multicultural market" in industry discourse reveals a racial dichotomy at the core of American advertising's business model, driving market segmentation strategies, shaping media buying, and influencing the division of labor.

Chapter 2, "Multicultural Strategy and the Production of Racial Expertise," focuses on the role of industry professionals known as *multicultural strategists* in US advertising and media agencies and the tools, technologies, and practices they use to produce marketable depictions of racialized populations for clients and colleagues. Strategists—along with the software platforms, corporate vernacular, ideologies, and other tangible and intangible elements from which they produce and analyze data on the purported behavioral traits of people of color—provide a key lens for under-

standing the advertising industry's *racial information system*. I focus closely on how strategists produce and utilize proprietary survey research platforms to demonstrate that, as in-house race consultants, their primary work is to (re)produce race ideology as data and expertise. While the immediate objective of this racial knowledge is to drive consumption and generate profit for advertisers and agencies, many professionals in the multicultural advertising industry see their work as more than a profit-driven exercise: they also consider it a vital tool for creating positive, socially beneficial, nonstereotypical media representations of non-white populations within American society.

The lax regulations surrounding the commercialization of the internet in the United States have enabled the rapid expansion of various surveillance methods to support consumer data collection and targeted advertising. Using a range of algorithmic decision-making and measurement techniques, marketers and media platforms now focus on transforming populations into audience data to facilitate prediction and economic extraction. As marketing budgets increasingly shift toward online platforms, the future of multicultural marketing hinges on its ability to align racial identity with the technological frameworks of online advertising. A key aspect of this adaptation is how effectively machine learning can deduce consumers' race and ethnicity based on algorithmic analyses of their online behavior.

Chapter 3, "Reaching 'Verified Hispanics': The Racial Science of Digital Advertising," delves into the impact of digital advertising on the multicultural marketing industry and the racial theories underlying how data companies and digital advertising professionals target and sell to "Hispanics" online. Multicultural advertising industry leaders argue that "multicultural" consumers are underrepresented in these audience datasets, which they claim hinders brands' ability to effectively engage with these consumer groups in the digital age. The chapter highlights that by participating in and advocating for the marketplace of racial audience data generated by algorithmic technologies, advertising professionals are repackaging centuries-old racial science theories that aim to quantify and predict racial traits. This practice subjects non-white racialized groups to heightened corporate and state surveillance, further exposing them to harm, criminalization, and exploitation.

US Census racial data are a foundational element of American advertising's racial information system, shaping the way multicultural marketing is presented to corporate America by emphasizing racial demographics as

central to consumer culture trends. Chapter 4, "The Total Market Turn: US Census Projections and Making the New Mainstream Consumer," looks at discussions within the US advertising industry about the rise of a majority non-white "total market" closely linked to long-standing debates over the definition of "mainstream" American identity and the perception of racial differences as either a unifying or divisive force in nation-building. These conversations also highlight political and economic struggles within the US advertising industry over who has the authority to be considered an expert in the American "mainstream" as whiteness is no longer assumed to be the default. In the ongoing effort to gain recognition and access to the marketing budgets they believe they deserve, multicultural advertising professionals have variously embraced, critiqued, and redefined the "total market" concept.

The conclusion, "Intersectionality, Inc.: Anti-Racism as Consumer Fantasy," examines US advertising's "racial reckoning" and explores how the American advertising industry's racial information system proposes that racial justice can be achieved through market-driven strategies, such as increasing the visibility and representation of people of color in advertisements, and aiming to make them "feel seen," validated, and respected by corporations. This shift aligns with what scholars Felice Blake and Paula Ioanide describe as "anti-racist incorporation," a discourse that acknowledges the issues of racism and racial justice but neutralizes their transformative potential. Unlike color-blind or diversity discourses that downplay systemic racism, anti-racist incorporation openly names these issues while maintaining the status quo. The growing use of intersectionality as a marketing strategy and calls for greater racial diversity in advertising might seem like progress. However, this evolution of anti-racism rhetoric within consumer culture reveals the false promises, contradictions, and ambivalence inherent in US capitalist culture, where a push for racially inclusive advertising exists alongside ongoing racialized violence, systemic oppression, and exclusion.

METHODS AND PREMISES

This book is the culmination of ethnographic fieldwork in the multicultural advertising industry in the United States between 2014 and 2020. My desire to understand the processes and political economy of racial knowledge production in the US advertising industry led me to following people and

their ideas across a variety of settings, including inside agency meetings and trade conventions, invitation-only industry events, trade press articles, and even the social media platform LinkedIn. Having interned at a Hispanic ad agency in college, I knew that the best way for me to embed myself in multicultural advertising epistemologies and practices was, to some degree, to do the work myself.

My fieldwork included two three-month internships at two different agencies: a Hispanic creative agency that I will refer to with the pseudonym "Soar" and a media agency that I will call "Vista." I chose to base my fieldwork in New York City because of its enduring status as the advertising mecca of the world. The agencies offered me exposure to distinct yet interconnected industry functions of advertising creation and placement. My agreement to use pseudonyms for the agencies I interned with and people I interviewed in any writing I produced from my research also afforded me extended access to meetings and more candid insights from research interlocutors.

I was able to present myself at both Soar and Vista as an anthropologist and an unpaid intern who, in exchange for participant observation opportunities, would be available to assist them on assignments on an ad hoc basis. These requests were generally kept at a minimum, but I was asked periodically to help with research and writing needs. Both agencies took great interest in and saw significant value in my being a cultural anthropologist who had prior professional experience in the marketing industry at respected global brands, as humanities and social science have been incorporated into consumer research methods at least since the 1950s.[62] Furthermore, I believe that my self-presentation as a twenty-something, light-skinned, educated, cisgendered woman of Puerto Rican ancestry aided my foray into the multicultural advertising world. Arlene Dávila refers to this as the "Latin Look," which in her view also facilitated her acceptance as a researcher by Hispanic advertising professionals by presenting "no threat to their normative ideal of Latinidad."[63]

At the Hispanic creative agency Soar, I was an intern in the strategy department. As will be explained in further detail in chapter 2, strategists are responsible for gathering and analyzing information about consumers and applying their analyses to unearthing the campaign's target consumer and core premise. Soar's strategy team was small and led by Vince—a longtime Hispanic advertising executive—along with a senior strategist, two junior level strategists, and a summer intern. All the strategists self-identified as Hispanic except for one, who was a Black male. The agency was the multicultural advertising subsidiary of a general market advertising shop that I

will refer to as "Blue." As I will explain further in chapter 1, *general market* is a term that industry professionals use to refer to advertising agencies not explicitly marked by race or ethnicity but simultaneously indexes non-Hispanic whiteness as the American consumer norm.

Both Soar and Blue were owned by the same global advertising holding company. For the most part, Soar functioned entirely separate from Blue and pitched for its own clients, sometimes even competing with Blue for the same accounts. Soar and Blue's respective strategy departments were situated on opposite ends of the same floor of a large open-concept office space in Manhattan, separated by a long hallway and automatically locking glass-paned doors that one needed an agency ID card to open.

One important affordance of this segmented corporate structure for my research was the access that I had to the general market side of the advertising agency business, which scholars have previously remarked as being difficult to achieve.[64] Soar's and Blue's strategists attended several agency-wide meetings and trainings together. These gatherings served as important sites for me to become acquainted with strategists and executive leadership at Blue and subsequently conduct interviews and observe meetings with them. While I was primarily situated on a day-to-day basis with Soar's strategy team, I also had purview into their relationship with Blue agency staff and the dynamics that informed their interactions and business dealings.

My internship at Soar provided me a context for understanding the epistemological practices that shape how multicultural advertising strategists produce racial knowledge. However, I knew that if I wanted to understand the impact that digital advertising is having on how companies and industry professionals conceptualize and sell race, I would have to spend some time at a media agency. Media agencies are the companies that brands contract with to determine which media channels to place the ads that their creative agency makes for them. Vista, a successful independent media agency based in downtown Manhattan, also had an in-house multicultural brand strategy department. The team was staffed by seven self-identified Latinas and one woman who described herself as mixed race. Vista's multicultural brand strategy department was subdivided into two main functions. I spent most of my internship with a team of three Latina women who worked primarily on fulfilling consultative requests from their colleagues who worked on general market accounts. These requests were usually for audience research about Hispanic consumers, along with recommendations for the television networks, radio, and digital media

platforms that advertisers should expend their media budgets on when targeting them.

The other half of Vista's multicultural brand strategy team was solely dedicated to planning the media placements for two wireless carrier clients who had dedicated internal Hispanic marketing departments and media targeting budgets. Their desks were situated far away, on the other end of the open-plan office, where they sat with the accounts' general market teams. As an intern, I was granted access to join and observe most meetings and agency events that the multicultural brand strategy department attended. By attending those meetings, I also became acquainted with other Vista employees, including members of the agency's digital advertising team, who were responsible for devising strategies for targeting US Hispanic online users across the web with their wireless carrier client's ads. In addition to my participant observation with the multicultural brand strategy team, I also was able to attend a weekly Hispanic digital advertising client conference call and interview the digital advertising professionals responsible for devising racially targeted digital ad campaigns.

I supplemented my agency internships with periodic trips to Miami, Los Angeles, and San Francisco to attend key industry events, including the Association of National Advertisers Multicultural Marketing and Diversity Conference, the Culture Marketing Council Conference, Hispanicize, the Interactive Advertising Bureau's Cross-Cultural Marketing Conference, and Google's Culture Marketing Conference, among several others. These convenings enriched my internship experiences by offering me insight into the social relationships that comprise the multicultural advertising industry along with how professional discourse about race takes shape. These events were also key sites for me to reconnect with research interlocutors and make contacts with new ones. I documented these events with audio recordings of panels and presentations as well as with photographs.

In addition to my participant observation fieldwork, I conducted ninety-eight semi-structured interviews with multicultural advertising industry professionals from across the United States. Most were people in strategy positions at multicultural creative and media agencies, although I spoke with general market agency strategists and executives along with multicultural marketers at several brands. While I did speak to African American and Asian American advertising professionals, the majority of those I interfaced with would likely consider themselves Hispanic advertising specialists. In many instances, the term *multicultural marketing* is now synonymous with *Hispanic advertising*, as the non-white Hispanic demo-

graphic represents, according to US Census data, the largest non-white population in the United States, and its population growth is among the most significant.[65]

To conclude, I want to clarify my use of terminology. Throughout this book, I use the terms *race* and *racial* rather than *ethnoracial* or *ethnic* when discussing American advertising practices, including Hispanic marketing. The classification of Hispanics by the US Census has shifted over time, evolving from the 1930 Census, when "Mexican" was listed as a racial category, to the introduction of "Hispanic" as a pan-ethnic category in the 1980 Census. Yet, in practice, the ethnicity attributed to the Hispanic category is often treated as equivalent to a racial category. In demographic surveys, government reporting, public policy analyses, and market research, Hispanics are frequently grouped together—regardless of intracategory racial differences—and compared to other official US racial populations. The racialization of people of Latin American ancestry as a distinct non-white group, with many identifying with the "some other race" category on the census, is also well documented.[66] As a testament to the ever-shifting politics of classification, the 2030 US Census will list "Hispanic or Latino" among other racial groups. In this book, I use the terms *racial* and *racial information system* to reflect how I observed American advertising professionals construct and deploy racial knowledge to shape understandings of human difference.

NOTES

1 Dímelo is a pseudonym.

2 "US Multicultural Media Spend to Grow." In 2023, advertisers spent over $34 billion on advertising targeted to Hispanic, African American, and Asian American markets, accounting for over 5 percent of overall advertising and marketing spending.

3 Frey, "US Will Become 'Minority White'"; Vespa, Medina, and Armstrong, *Demographic Turning Points*, 7.

4 "Marc Pritchard"; Pritchard, "New Habits for Multicultural Growth."

5 See Lears, *Fables of Abundance*; Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*; McGovern, *Sold American*; Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*.

6 Turow, *Breaking Up America*.

7 For the construction of a child-oriented market with the rise of the television network Nickelodeon, see Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule!*; on the commodification of feminist politics in the twenty-first century, see Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*; about the role of anti-Black racial discrimination in US retail settings, see Austin, "'A Nation of Thieves'"; for an anthropological exploration of African American consumers through the lives of children, see Chin, *Purchasing Power*, and O'Barr, *Culture and the Ad*. Outside the American context, anthropologists have examined advertising agencies in nations like Sri Lanka, Trinidad, and India and have documented industry professionals' processes of imagining audiences as they navigate global advertisers' expectations for locally resonant campaigns. See Kemper, *Buying and Believing*; Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke*; Miller, *Capitalism*.

8 Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.*; Shankar, *Advertising Diversity*.

9 Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.*, chap. 2.

10 Shankar, "Nothing Sells like Whiteness."

11 Napoli, *Audience Evolution*, 30.

12 Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, 32, 35.

13 Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out*.

14 Chatelain, *Franchise*, 18. For another important book on the racial politics of fast food marketing, see Kwate, *White Burgers, Black Cash*.

15 Quoted in Helm, "Ethnic Marketing."

16 Quoted in Helm, "Ethnic Marketing."

17 WARC, "McDonald's Eyes Ethnic Consumers."

18 York, "Ethnic Insights Form."

19 WARC, "McDonald's Eyes Ethnic Consumers."

20 McDonald's Corporation, "Black and Golden."

21 Taylor, "Leaked Memo."

22 Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 141.

23 See Robinson, *Black Marxism*, for historical background on the role of racial thinking in the structure of capitalism's economic and social hierarchies, with antecedents in feudal Europe. See also Melamed, "Racial Capitalism"; Jenkins and Leroy, introduction to *Histories of Racial Capitalism*.

24 In *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*, historians Karen Fields and Barbara Fields critique these enduring epistemologies for misconstruing the products of racist power structures as racial traits. They propose the concept of "racecraft," a cognitive illusion akin to witchcraft, which obscures the fact that racism is the creator of race as a construct of what it means to be human shaped by political structures designed to justify inequality and exploitation.

25 Goldberg, "Racial Knowledge," 154–55.

26 Hall, *Race: The Floating Signifier*.

27 Goldberg, "Racial Knowledge," 155.

28 Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, 7.

29 Roberts, *Fatal Invention*; Elias and Feagin, *Racial Theories in Social Science*.

30 Graves and Goodman, *Racism, Not Race*, 23.

31 "Linnaeus and Race."

32 Smedley, *Race in North America*, 170.

33 "Linnaeus and Race."

34 Appiah, *Lies That Bind*, 26.

35 Morton and Combe, *Crania Americana*. For the refutation of Morton and other eugenics, including scientific racism, see Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*.

36 Du Bois's *Philadelphia Negro* used data to link African American struggles to social conditions. In 1885, Anténor Firmin's *The Equality of the Human Races* refuted racial science with anthropological evidence.

37 Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*.

38 Although Franz Boas and his students are credited with challenging scientific racism with cultural relativism, historians have shown the ways in which anthropologists of the early twentieth century "promoted a vision of race rooted in both bodies *and* cultures," as Tracy Teslow writes in *Constructing Race: The Science of Bodies and Cultures in American Anthropol-*

ogy (3). Teslow observes that this framing not only naturalized race but embedded racial logics in the culture concept itself, leaving a lasting legacy in the theorization of human differences within anthropology and wider society. See also Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics*; Baker, "Racist Anti-Racism"; Trouillot, "Adieu, Culture."

39   Rutherford, *How to Argue with a Racist*.

40   Smedley and Smedley, "Race as Biology Is Fiction."

41   Smedley, *Race in North America*, 33.

42   On Black athleticism, see Schultz, "Racialized Osteology"; on race-based medicine, see Kahn, *Race in a Bottle*; on the idea of "the Black vote," see Johnson, "How the Black Vote Became."

43   Pegg et al., "Revealed: International 'Race Science' Network."

44   While on the 2024 campaign trail, Donald Trump drew a direct link between Latin American immigration, violent crime, and genetics, stating, "We got a lot of bad genes in our country right now." See Oza, "Trump's Talk of 'Bad Genes.'"

45   Hammonds and Herzig, "Introduction to the End of Race," 311.

46   McDonald's Corporation, *McDonald's 2021–2022*.

47   Pepviz, *Circle of Joy*, 6.

48   Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out*, 321.

49   Scholars like Cedric Robinson have pointed out that racialism—or the categorization and hierarchical treatment of people based on traits believed to be inherent and immutable—was not exclusive to the emergence of capitalism but was already present in Europe during the feudal and medieval periods. See Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

50   Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben*; Kennedy, "Marketing Goods," 621–22.

51   Davis, "Selling Whiteness?"; Kennedy, "Marketing Goods."

52   "Commodity racism" is a term developed by Anne McClintock in her 1995 book *Imperial Leather*, where she examined how turn-of-the-twentieth-century soap advertising in imperial England was suffused with symbolism about cleanliness that functioned to normalize ideologies of white supremacy. In Elizabeth Chin's 2015 article "Commodity Racism," she broadens the definition of "commodity racism" to refer "racist modes of the commodification of people," which include slavery but also advertising's repertoire of media where racial logics are embedded.

53   hooks, *Black Looks*, 21–39.

54   Wilson, "Race in Commodity Exchange and Consumption," 587.

55   Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*, 2.

56   Chang, *Who We Be*; Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*.

57   Ferguson, *Reorder of Things*, 66.

58   Frank, *Conquest of Cool*, 25.

59   Ferguson, *Reorder of Things*, 73.

60 Turow, *Breaking Up America*.

61 Purpose Brand. "Black Lives Matter Sparks Marketing Response."

62 Featherstone, *Divining Desire*.

63 Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.*, 19.

64 Shankar, *Advertising Diversity*, 30.

65 US Census Bureau, "Hispanic Heritage Month."

66 Lopez, Krogstad, and Passel, "Who Is Hispanic?" Morales, *Latinx*, argues that those classified as "Latinx" occupy an in-between space that challenges the US Black/white racial binary. Yet, in marketing contexts, I've observed this "mixedness" still framed in racialized terms.

CHAPTER 1. THE "GENERAL MARKET": ON THE COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF AMERICAN WHITENESS

This chapter draws on my chapter "Making the Mass White: How Racial Segregation Shaped Consumer Segmentation," in *Race in the Marketplace: Crossing Critical Boundaries* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), edited by Guillaume D. Johnson et al.

1 Maheshwari, "Different Ads."

2 Personal communication with the author, 2016.

3 Personal communication with the author, 2016.

4 Personal communication with the author, 2018.

5 Personal communication with the author, 2018.

6 Personal communication with the author, 2018.

7 Hartigan, *Racial Situations*, 191.

8 Dyer, *White*.

9 Allen, *Invention of the White Race*.

10 Mills, *Racial Contract*, 61; Morris, "Standard White," 952.

11 Dyer, "Matter of Whiteness," 10.

12 Haney-López, *White by Law*; Harris, "Whiteness as Property."

13 In a 2005 implicit association study at an American university, psychologists Thierry Devos and Mahzarin Banaji found that most of the student participants unconsciously understood the categories of "American" and "white" as synonymous. See Devos and Banaji, "American = White?"

14 Mehaffy, "Advertising Race," 133.

15 Mehaffy, "Advertising Race," 133.

16 Manring, *Slave in a Box*, 36.

17 McGovern, *Sold American*, 106.

18 Marchand, *Advertising the American*, 64.

19 McGovern, *Sold American*, 97.

20 McGovern, *Sold American*, 119.

21 Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*.