FASHIONS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS: THE RHETORICAL PRODUCTION OF ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

By

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(Under the Direction of Roger Stahl)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the rhetorical production of ethical consumption as facilitated by contemporary cause marketing. It critiques the cause marketing rhetoric of three consumer brands: Starbucks, American Apparel and Toyota Prius. Each chapter critiques a distinct strategy of cause marketing, all of which contribute to the rhetoric of civic branding. The introductory chapter traces the history of consumer-cultural theory and then examines some of the competing theories of consumer movement today. Chapter two examines the cause marketing of Starbucks, specifically its "coffee for voting" and Create Jobs for USA campaigns. In it I critique Starbucks' removal of the cash nexus from its ethical transactions, thus allowing the Starbucks brand to embody civic engagement outside the cash nexus while preserving the ritual of capitalist, ethical consumption. Chapter three examines the ethical aesthetics and aesthetic politics of the clothing brand, American Apparel. In it I critique the clothier's facilitation of a knowledge economy of ethical fashion, coupled with its sexualizing of social movements. The dynamic creates a postmodern space of ethical fashion where free play is situated as social action and vice versa. Chapter four examines the cause marketing and social

responsibility of Toyota Prius and Toyota respectively. In it I critique the displacement of political subjectivity in favor of private innovation, as embodied by the Prius brand. Chapter five concludes with a theorization of what I call civic branding, a new brand dynamic situated between commodity, consumer and cause. Unlike ethical commodification, I argue, civic branding is more nebulous and thus more difficult to critique, as well as more seductive to ethical consumers. I argue that critics must attend more seriously to the rhetoric of civic branding if we are to better interpret and evaluate the ways in which contemporary consumer culture informs modes of civic engagement.

INDEX WORDS: Ethical consumption, Consumer culture, Consumer activism, Cause marketing, Corporate social responsibility, Rhetoric, Branding, Civic branding, Postmodernism, Civic engagement, Citizen-consumer subject

DEDICATION

This work would not be possible without the endless support of my family. Thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must first thank my adviser, Roger Stahl, for his insight and above all his humanity. I would also like to thank my committee members: Barbara Biesecker, Celeste Condit, James Hamilton, and Edward Panetta.

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B.A., College of Charleston, 2002

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Athens, Georgia

2013

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May 2013

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose

A revolution is happening. It is not the type of revolution we see on the evening news but the type we encounter during its commercial breaks**.** Instead of taking to the streets we are taking to the shopping malls, changing the world one purchase at a time. At least that is what recent commercial culture would have us believe. The past decade has witnessed an overwhelming surge in consumer activism, ranging from hybrid automobiles to organic clothing, slow food, free-range farming, no-logo t-shirts, and fair-trade coffee, not to mention the resurgence in local farmers' markets and the pervasive struggle for authenticity. Across the gamut of consumer culture people have learned the social, cultural and environmental impacts of their purchases, while growing more self-conscious of their ethical-consuming personas. "Go green," "buy local," "eat organic," "make trade fair," "support independent music," and "keep *our city* weird" are just some of the imperatives headlining contemporary consumer culture. Increasingly fewer and fewer areas of consumption remain safely detached from apparently ethical decisions and or issues of public controversy. The practice of consumption is consuming the rhetoric of civic engagement.

Today's intense demand for ethical production has in turn created a lucrative market for ethical consumption. Many corporations have accommodated the rise in consumer activism by engaging in fierce initiatives of social responsibility and cause marketing, branding themselves as world stewards committed to doing good before making a profit. Indeed almost all marketers

and consumers appear to be engaging in some form of philanthropy or civic action, making ethical consumption nearly impossible to avoid even if one wished. Ethical decisions have emerged in the most seemingly mundane commodities. In the past year, for example, the struggle over gay rights appeared in the form of a chicken breast, as thousands of Americans participated in the boycotting and buycotting of Chick-fil-A. Ethical consumers wishing to avoid public controversy may simply purchase a tube of "Save the Earth" bubblegum. Whatever one's politics, let no one forget Sprint's reminder that it is our "right" to have unlimited data on our phones. The civic rhetoric of contemporary marketing has reached a state of hyperbole, implicating even the most mundane commodities and services. The rhetorical dynamic presents serious implications for the practice of civic engagement. As consumption steadily assumes the appearance of social action, social activists are invited to adopt the form of consumer culture. The discourse of each turns on the other, thus potentially engendering a mutual space of consumer and civic action.

This dissertation explores the interrelationship between consumer culture and civic engagement situated within the rhetoric of cause marketing. As ethical consumption gains momentum it arguably becomes difficult for consumers and activists to clearly distinguish between the two. The rhetorical dynamic informs the practices of consumption and citizenship respectively. As marketers develop more sophisticated strategies of inscribing their commodities and brands within the realm of public discourse, individuals are invited to participate as citizens and consumers simultaneously. It becomes difficult to conceptualize consumption detached from civic life, while it *appears* relatively easy to commodify and consume issues of public concern. As the lines between private and public space are blurred, it is difficult to recognize the ethical limitations of consumption. It is equally difficult to recognize and address public issues excluded

from discourses of consumption, such as the need to simply consume less. It is thus urgent that we critically evaluate this rhetorical practice. This dissertation critiques the rhetorical dynamics of three cause-marketing campaigns: those of Starbucks, American Apparel and Toyota Prius. It explores not only the ethical marketing of goods and services but also the rhetorical construction of consumption as civic engagement, and civic engagement as the practice of brand identity. By focusing on ethical-marketing rhetoric, i.e., commercial messages and marketing campaigns, rather than merely the circulation of signs in contemporary consumer culture we may gain special insight into the rhetorical production of civic engagement located in the discourse of ethical consumption.

By way of introduction I will now explore three areas germane to this study. First I help put contemporary ethical consumption in context by providing a brief history of American consumer activism, followed by a theoretical survey of corporate social responsibility and cause marketing. Second, in the effort to theoretically ground my analysis, I conduct a survey of consumer-cultural thought, illustrating the contributions of critical theory and cultural studies. Third I explicate the import of rhetorical studies on consumer culture, examining some noteworthy critiques of consumer movements. I conclude with a brief justification of my texts and the frameworks I use to critique them.

Commerce and the Public

Consumer activism is a rich tradition of consumer culture. It is also a long American tradition, predating even the Boston Tea Party (Glickman, 2009). During the colonial era, for example, many women wore homespun dresses to avoid British labor as well as demonstrate symbolic support for the American patriot. Half a century later there sprouted up a host of "free-produce" markets in the North, protesting slavery. In fact the Civil Rights movement has often

utilized consuming practices as a method of protest. Boycotting segregated buses and buycotting segregated diners were both important strategies in the struggle for civil rights in the Fifties and Sixties. Other groups have also utilized consumption with much success. The newly emergent "consumer class" of the early twentieth century utilized its "buying power" to fight for better labor conditions, just as Ralph Nader's "consumer rights" movement of the Seventies achieved greater regulation of commodity production. Perhaps the most prominent artifact of this movement is Nader's (1965) *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile*, a critical expose of corporate cost-benefit analysis, including General Motors' fiscally-grounded decision to distribute the Corvair, which it knew to be lethal. The book resulted in new car manufacturing regulations the following year. Yet because consumer activism is usually but a means to a greater end, Glickman asserts, it is difficult for many to appreciate consumer activism itself as a rich American tradition. It is also a complicated tradition. For example, while proponents of economic liberalism once detested consumer activism, as it entailed greater regulation, many such liberals are now in large support of it, as it arguably facilitates an economic model of social progress as opposed to a government model, i.e., let the marketplace decide what is ethical. Consumer activism can thus hardly be labeled either liberal or conservative; it is instead subject to multiple forms and vulnerable to multiple political projects as it emerges within particular discursive contexts.

While consumer activism is nothing new, its cultural pervasiveness today is unprecedented. Most recently consumer activism has taken the popular form of ethical consumption, steered by corporate cause marketing. Kathleen Kuehn estimates cause marketing grew 23 percent between 2005 and 2006, turning it into a $1.5 billion industry (2009, p. 24). One survey found 86% of U.S. consumers willing to switch to brands associated with charitable

causes (p. 24). Charitable giving by corporations also rose to $13.77 billion in 2005 (Larson et al., 2008, p. 271). While certain brands such as Starbucks, American Apparel, Toyota Prius, Tom's Shoes, and others have defined themselves by such causes, others simply attach themselves to particular causes as an attempt to gain social ethos when necessary (Potter, 2011). In either case it is difficult to find a consumer brand disconnected from any social cause or philanthropic endeavor.

To appreciate the recent surge in cause marketing we must first understand the history of corporate social responsibility (hereafter CSR). According to marketing experts, Demetriou, Papasolomou, and Vrontis, "CSR can be used to strengthen corporate reputation and profitability by signaling to the various stakeholders with whom the organization interacts that it is committed to meeting its moral obligation" (2009, p. 267). While CSR is now a standard operating procedure for many major corporations, the concept was relatively novel when conceived in the late Sixties (Vogel, 2006). Its theory, as famously articulated by R. Edward Freeman (2010) in his, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, states that corporations will develop better public relations by emphasizing their engagement with and commitment to those beyond the obvious shareholders of the company. Corporations should additionally consider the *stakeholders*, those who may not be directly monetarily invested in the company but who nonetheless share the consequences of its actions. This model of "corporate conscience" was in part inspired by poor public relations suffered by the newly emergent multinational corporations of the Sixties, who arguably exacerbated poverty in the developing world (Ibid). Not surprisingly there has been a strong correlation between corporate controversies and subsequent CSR engagement over the past five decades (Carroll, 2009). Writing primarily from a corporate perspective, most experts aim to perfect marketing formulas rather than offer cultural critique,

addressing either consumer effectiveness or philanthropic efficacy. Bronn (2006), for example, explicates the difficulties of engaging CSR on an international scale, while Akaka and Alden (2010) focus on CSR in the age of globalization. Much of this "how to" literature can be found in business and marketing journals, along with trade magazines such as *Advertising Age*, *Brandweek*, *American Demographics*, and *Marketing Today*. Of course, corporate conscience is not without its critics. Robert Reich (2008) argues CSR preemptively undermines the more effective method of government regulation, which should play a larger role in setting corporate standards. In any case, corporate conscience has certainly changed the face of corporate America since its inception. What started as a corporate response to social criticism has turned into standard practice for many companies.

One important upshot of CSR is the newly emergent, cause marketing. In the effort to establish or maintain positive PR many corporations take the additional step of attaching themselves or their commodities/services to specific social causes. The trend has proven overwhelmingly successful, even when there is no logical connection between brand and cause (Nan & Heo, 2009). Marketers have demonstrated the power to inscribe their brands and commodities in the most unlikely public discourses, while galvanizing consumers in ways never before seen. Cause marketing is now a billion dollar industry and a pervasive presence in consumer culture (Kuehn, 2009).

Yet ethical consumption implies more than dollar signs; its rhetoric aims to transform consumption into civic engagement. Despite the variety of causes addressed, the underlying message of all cause marketing is universal: To consume is to make the world a better place one purchase at a time. Cause marketing does not simply sell products, it sells the practice of consumption as social action. To be a consumer is to be an actively engaged citizen according to

the logic of these campaigns. Thus what began as consumer activists demanding more from their distributors has transformed into a corporate enterprise rhetorically shaping the terrain of consumption (Littler, 2011). To help illuminate the cultural implications of this shift I now turn to the realm of consumer-cultural theory.

Consumer Culture

While the business journals and trades aim to perfect marketing formulas, the humanities remain far more critical. Here I address some of the prominent critical and cultural theories of consumption. We may begin with Thorstein Veblen's ([1899] 1994) transformational *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In this important work Veblen shifts focus form the economics of labor (see Marx, [1887] 1990) to the culture of consumption. Perhaps most noteworthy is Veblen's theory of "conspicuous consumption," highlighting the need of the "leisure class" to distinguish itself through "wasteful consumption." Goods are consumed to signify social status rather than achieve maximum product utility at minimum cost. In fact, the more wasteful the purchase is the better. To signify that one could waste money frivolously became the true utility of leisure purchases, a notion that would profoundly challenge Marx's famous distinction between use and exchange value. Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke (1952) goes so far as to call Veblen a rhetorical theorist of capitalist rhetoric. Veblen's counterintuitive theories would prove especially prescient during the consumer boom of the "Affluent Society" half a century later.

During that time period came the first significant wave of consumer-cultural criticism in the form of "mass society" critique. Most notably came C. Wright Mills' (1956) "hypodermic needle" model of mass media, in which consumers of information were believed to be "injected" with propaganda over the airwaves. Similarly, the first wave of commercial criticism was launched by Vance Packard's (1957) *The Hidden Persuaders*, exposing many of Fifth Avenue's

advertising techniques. Ironically, this scathing critique is assigned reading in many business classes today (see New York University Stern School of Business, 2012). Since the successful publication of this book several others followed suit, including Wilson Key's (1972) *Subliminal Seduction* and Stuart Ewen's (1976) *Captains of Consciousness*. These popular and groundbreaking works exposed many Americans to the inner workings of the culture industry. Yet the homogenous top-down tone of these analyses has also overlooked complex cultural dynamics, mainly failing to account for the productive activity of consumers, a problem that has perennially plagued this critical tradition (Sassatelli, 2007).

Offering a critical alternative to mass-society criticism, Horkheimer and Adorno's ([1944] 1984) "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" stands as the inaugural and arguably single most important critique of consumer culture. The authors warn, "The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises," offering only a "commendation of the depressing world it sought to escape" (p. 139). Consumers are taught to find meaning in commodities which can only leave them empty: "The supreme law is that they [consumers] shall not satisfy their desires at any price" (p. 141). Consumption thus becomes the medium of cultural production: "The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry" (p. 126). Given the collapse of high culture into everyday consumption, art and commodities begin to mimic one another, voiding any distinction between the two. The Frankfurt School thus moves beyond the peddling of commodities to the more critical issue of how the culture industry produces a world of consumers painted in its own image.

Fellow Frankfurt School critic, Herbert Marcuse ([1965] 2007) offers a similar critique in his "Remarks on a Redefinition of Culture," arguing that we have not so much eliminated high culture as made it "more available than ever before" (p. 19). Our mode of experience, however,

emanates from current social needs rather than "pure theory." Likewise, "The integration of cultural values into the established society cancels the alienation of culture from civilization" (p. 20). Yet none of this is to suggest that people are duped or even coerced into their consuming practices. Indeed:

> The people enjoy a considerable range of freedom in buying and selling, in looking for jobs and in choosing jobs, in expressing their opinion, in moving about—but their liberties nowhere transcend the established social system which determines their needs, their choice and their opinions. (p. 23)

The passage demonstrates an important nuance in Frankfurt School theory often overlooked. It is not through consumer manipulation but instead the presentation of choice facilitating the appearance of consumer autonomy and overshadowing its homogenizing function. Nevertheless the culture industry serves the mode of production rather than the "humanization" of society (p. 31). To paraphrase Horkheimer & Adorno, along with Marcuse, the function of the culture industry is to condition a one-dimensional consumer. Thus we see early on, albeit in its embryonic stage, the gradual collapse between consumer and public culture.

The next phase of consumer-cultural studies emerges in the work of Pierre Bourdieu and the early work of Jean Baudrillard. Bourdieu and Baudrillard are not concerned with Madison Avenue, nor do they conceptualize the culture industry as merely a capitalist auxiliary. More closely aligned to the tradition of Veblen, Bourdieu and Baudrillard develop what may be considered rhetorical theories of consumer culture. Bourdieu's theory of *symbolic capital,* for example, distinguishes between monetary, social and cultural capital, of which the latter two are expressed symbolically. While taste in fine art, for example, may require no monetary capital, it does often presume a degree of monetary capital to help facilitate one's artistic tastes. In turn,

fine art may be rhetorically deployed to *distinguish* oneself from working class consumers lacking an appreciation for these "finer" things. Similarly, in the *Consumer Society*, Baudrillard explicates the fluctuation of value in relation to consumer access. "When broader strata accede to a particular category of signs, the upper classes are obliged to distance themselves by other markers which are limited in number" ([1970] 2008, p. 111). Similarly, in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* ([1972] 1981), Baudrillard advances his theory of commodity-as-sign by challenging Marx's distinction between use and exchange value. In line with Veblen, Baudrillard argues that a commodity's exchange value becomes its use value in so far as it helps distinguish the higher strata of consumers from the masses. Thus both Bourdieu and Baudrillard demonstrate the rhetorical function of commodities particularly as they circulate in the affluent society. Such work is particular germane to this dissertation as it provides a theoretical framework for understanding the recent alignment between ethical consumption and consumer distinction.

Today more and more theorists invest themselves in the politics of consumption, specifically ethical consumption. In 2000 not one but two anthologies were published under the title, *The Consumer Society Reader* (see Schor & Holt, 2000; see also Lee, 2000), followed by the *Journal of Consumer Culture*'s inaugural issue in 2001. Proceeding anthologies, *Confronting Consumption* (2002), *Consumption and Citizenship* (2008), *The Politics and Pleasures of Consuming Differently* (2009), and *Ethical Consumption* (2011) reflect the political shift of consumer culture over the past decade. Attention to politics invites critics to consider its rhetorical significance. Given its historical focus on public contestation, rhetorical criticism can offer valuable insight into an area of consumption aimed at social change. Thus I now turn to

rhetorical studies to illuminate its potential import for the production of citizenship and civic engagement in ethical consumption.

Rhetorical Studies

This dissertation operates within a non-Aristotelian framework of rhetorical theory. Kenneth Burke is largely responsible for the American uprooting of Aristotelian rhetorical theory in his groundbreaking, *The Rhetoric of Motives* (1952). Here Burke argues that humans induce each other to action not so much through rational appeals to logic, emotions and character, but through a process of what he calls *Identification*. Rhetors achieve identification when they align their interests with those interests of their audiences. Theoretically, identification is significant in that it allows rhetoricians to consider rhetorical possibilities outside the limitations of rational discourse. Brand marketing, for example, arguably employs methods of brand identification to induce individuals to consumption. In this light, consumers buy certain goods not merely for rational purposes but out of sense of identification, or perhaps even a desire to identify, with specific commercial brands. Here Burke is instrumental to my theory of civic branding as a commercial strategy to encourage citizen-consumers to identify certain brands with civic engagement.

This dissertation also attends primarily to the rhetorical production of civic engagement within cause marketing. Civic engagement has remained a perennial fixture of rhetorical studies since its inception. Isocrates primarily emphasized the orator's civic responsibilities, ensured by the demonstration of good will for rhetorical effectiveness (2001). Aristotle considered character the most important of the three major appeals (2001). Cicero's lessons on rhetoric were primarily lessons of citizenship, designed to inspire republican virtue (2001). Today rhetoricians explore the discursive production of civic engagement in domains other than oratory. Susan Zaeske

(2002), for example, demonstrates the importance antislavery petitioning had on defining women's citizenship in the nineteenth century. Robert Asen (2004) reverses traditional assumptions by arguing citizenship is itself an important mode of civic engagement and one that can be enacted discursively rather than merely through practices such as voting. Darrin Hicks (2007) observes a process of "democratic subjectification" designed to help citizens negotiate their personal and political moralities. Many now attend to popular texts as well, including the production of citizenship in film and television (see Kaplan, 2005). Some also examine its production within consumer culture. Leading this conversation is Christine Harold, concerned primarily with the privatization of public space and its implications for civic engagement (2009). Harold also critiques the rhetoric of anti-corporate, consumer protest and its possibilities for social transformation (2004). Similarly, Lester Olsen and Thomas Goodnight (1994) have evaluated the power of consumer activism to inform issues of public controversy. Additionally, there is an abundance of literature from outside the field. Below I will address some of the central themes of this literature, beginning with Harold and followed by Olsen & Goodnight, along with some non-rhetoricians informing this conversation.

Christine Harold stands as arguably the most prolific voice on the rhetoric of commercial culture, writing for over a decade in this area. Her sophisticated critique attends to both commercial and consumer rhetoric, thus accounting for consumer resistance, as opposed to the traditional top-down critique of "hidden persuaders." Her theory of consumer resistance is also insightful. In "Pranking Rhetoric: Culture Jamming as Media Activism" (2004), Harold points to a number of consumer protests eluding the threat of cooptation. Harold draws a subtle distinction between culture "jammers" and whom she calls "pranksters." The former hopes to collapse the system by way of un-involvement, antagonism or subversion. Examples of culture jamming

include Kalle Lasn's counter-cultural initiatives such as "Buy Nothing Day," "Digital Detox Week" and "Black Spot" sneakers, along with his highly popular, *Adbusters* magazine. Culture jammers aspire to turn popular momentum against the culture industry and sabotage it, ultimately setting individuals free. Pranksters, on the other hand, subvert the system more playfully. Their goal is not to overthrow commercial culture so much as make fun of it in such a way that escapes rational deliberation. Utilizing silly and playful tactics, pranksters remove the threat of being labeled deviants, lest the targets of their pranks be accused of having no sense of humor. Simultaneously, due to the absurd nature of these pranks, the rhetoric cannot be appropriated either. It is simply offered to the public as a playful interruption to the dominant order. Resisting antagonism, pranksters preclude opposition and cooptation all at once. While jammers destroy, pranksters accelerate things in a new direction.

Serving as pranking exemplar is the Barbie Liberation Organization's "gender-hacking" experiment. One Christmas shopping season, Harold notes, a group of "pranksters" surreptitiously swapped the vocal chips in Barbie dolls with those of G.I. Joe dolls, which were then repackaged and distributed unknowingly by department stores. Many young boys and girls consequently received a confusing surprise when opening their presents on Christmas morning. But for Harold (2004), the prank's success came not simply in forcing children to challenge gender norms. More importantly, the playful nature of the prank escaped the old dichotomy between the culture industry and counter-cultural activists. The subversive strategies of pranksters expose the limitations of consumer culture in ways that culture jamming cannot. Whereas culture jamming reinforces the binary between authority and subject, pranking reinscribes the binary into a complex field of signifiers, thus disrupting the dominant logic of

consumer culture. Harold's attention to nuance opens new possibilities for the theorization of consumer resistance.

Similarly to Harold, Olsen & Goodnight (1994) offer a consumer-cultural critique of advocacy exceeding rational discourse. Their "Entanglements of Consumption, Cruelty, Privacy, and Fashion: The Social Controversy Over Fur" critiques the fashion-fur debate as a site of public controversy illuminating the implications for nondiscursive rebuttals within a social movement. It also illustrates consumer culture's unique significance to public controversy. Regarding the former, anti-fur activists redefine the ethical context of fur by undercutting the supposed distinction between the humane and non-humane killing of animals. Displaying emotionally-charged images that dissuade people from supporting *any* killing of animals, protesters force the fur industry outside its traditional argumentative context, now having to address anti-fur activists on their own terms. The subsequent impasse creates a site of controversy turning the discourse in unexpected directions, making it less manageable for consumer culture. Here animal-rights advocates align with anti-elitist advocates, given fur's function as a social status symbol. Thus in line with Burke's theory of identification, even seemingly superficial issues such as fashion may trigger more explicitly public controversies when its interests are identified as such.

It is not merely by chance that fashion and public controversy connect. Olsen and Goodnight draw on Douglas Porpora's assertion that Americans value their freedom to purchase however they choose precisely because consumption has become the "primary means of expressing individuality" (p. 349). America's inherent tension between individuality (performed through consumption) and citizenship (valued as a nation) thereby opens new spaces for public deliberation and new expressions of resistance. The authors assert, "In selection of dress,

consumption makes a nondiscursive public statement about one's identity, and clothing choices become an extension of one's self-concept" (p. 348). Not only is consumption infused into the political, but, more optimistically, consumption facilitates new political prospects:

> Capitalism has powerful codes and means of reproduction. However, its very ubiquity creates and connects multiple sites for controversy. Because expressions of capitalism are metonymically connected, struggle at one site speaks to others. While it may be true that each public use of a product turns persons into walking commercial displays for one enterprise or another, social controversy turns each site of display into a potential place for discussion. (p. 366)

Thus while daunting on one hand, the clutch of consumer culture simultaneously opens itself to scathing critique by the very public it seeks to create. The critic's job is to explore the potential for new grounds of debate and new allies (as well as enemies) of resistance within the realm of consumer activism. The authors ultimately predict, "Rhetorical inquiries into controversies over consumption will assume increasing importance as consumerism steadily replaces work or production" as the primary organizing force in life (p. 366). Offered an impressive five years before the transformative WTO protests in Seattle, 1999, Olsen and Goodnight's prescient prediction has certainly rung true. Not only has consumer culture sparked multiple public controversies since that time, but these seemingly fragmented controversies have also congealed to ignite more fundamental questions of consumer activism and democratic action (Hardt & Negri, 2000).

Outside the discipline other notable critics arm consumer activists with an arsenal of rhetorical strategies. Journalist Naomi Klein applauds culture jamming (2000) and "no logo" fashion (2002) as crucial attempts to subvert global capitalism. Similarly, Kalle Lasn (1999)

implores individuals to abandon their dependency on consumerism and turn instead to more "authentic" modes of expression. Examples of Lasn's culture jamming can be found in his popular magazine, *AdBusters*. Following Veblen and Baudrillard, Lasn argues it is not a general lack of material goods but rather a plenitude from which the West suffers today. Because so many Westerners no longer struggle for basic survival needs, artificial needs are created to provide new struggles, completely disconnected from any authentic human experience. Unlike Baudrillard, however, Lasn remains committed to digging our way out of consumer culture. The passionate network of advocates Klein and Lasn have generated over the past decade optimistically demonstrate an ongoing grassroots commitment to undermining and perhaps overturning the power of commercial capitalism.

Still, commercial culture has proven equally savvy in responding to its critics. Andrew Baker (2008) draws on Lasn's theories by outlining a two-step process of commodity and ideological forms. First corporations transform subversive signs into mass-produced commodities. If that fails corporations then push the subversive ideologies into the realm of social deviancy. In either case, commercial culture maintains its hegemony by either appropriating or criminalizing subversive consumer behavior. Criticism deemed too subversive is pushed to the side of deviancy, while that deemed "commodifiable" and marketable is subsumed within dominant consumer culture. It likewise becomes extremely difficult for anti-consumerism movements to gain significant traction. Similarly, rhetorical critic Andrew King (1976) explicates the "rhetoric of power maintenance" in his four-step, "ideo topoi:" ridicule, crying anarchy, setting impossible standards, and, finally, cooptation. Through commercial media and other devices capitalists have thus proven highly effective in thwarting anti-consumerism.

In addition to its obstacles ethical consumption also has its critics, who argue its social ideals are belied by the facilitation of fashion, exclusivity and social hierarchy, those very things it attempts to undermine (see Potter, 2010; see also Heath & Potter, 2004; see also Brooks, 2001, see also Frank, 1997). Lewis & Potter's anthology, *Ethical Consumption* (2011), has dedicated an entire section to this problematic, titled, "Commodities and Materiality." Coles & Crang (Ibid) critique the degree to which alternative food consumption is fueled by commodity fetishism, as these boutiques are often located in exclusive areas of town. Gibson & Stanes (Ibid) ask similarly, "Is Green the New Black?" questioning the radical potential of ethical trendiness. Potter (Ibid) discusses the cultural implications of ethically branded bottle water, while Franklin (Ibid) questions the aesthetic motivations behind secondhand consumption. Elsewhere Mara Einstein (2012) argues that while consumer activism has its heart in the right place, the capitalist marketplace will inevitably fail to bring radical change, thereby allowing the pretense of activism to justify and perpetuate uneven capitalist practices. Indeed every innovation of ethical consumption appears to generate new ethical dilemmas. It is seen by many as a naive attempt to consume our way out of the pitfalls of consumption. Further, the competing ideals of social protest and consumer distinction are sometimes unified by commercial culture into a singular aesthetic, leaving no distance between the two. Ethical consumption is vehemently consumerist and anti-consumerist all at once. So while we recognize its importance we also acknowledge its limitations, mainly the imposition of global capitalism and deeply imbedded desires of domination.

For all of these reasons, we are perhaps witnessing the tipping point of ethical consumption. Jack Neff, a writer for *Advertising Age*, suggests many consumers have grown skeptical and jaded, as self-purported willingness to pay more for green commodities is down

roughly ten percent from 2008 (2012). Yet Neff assures his marketing audience that this statistic signals the need for a paradigm shift rather than a retreat in cause marketing. While eco-friendliness is still a $40 billion business, marketers must engage in creative ethical campaigns to preserve its freshness, he contends. He points to the provocative "Showerpooling" initiative of Unilever's Axe soap in which individuals are encouraged to share the shower with a friend "or an attractive stranger" (Neff, p. 6). While even Unilever acknowledges the tongue-in-cheek nature of its campaign, the initiative succeeds because it appears to empower consumers (not to mention market sex, the time-tested strategy Axe has hyperbolically exploited over the years). Cause-marketing rhetoric thus appears more socially committed and more creatively invested than ever before, making our job as critics all the more challenging.

This section has demonstrated the difficulty and sometimes contentiousness of theorizing consumer rhetorics. While rhetorical studies helps illuminate the political dimension of consumer culture and its implications for civic engagement, there is no consensus regarding the nature of those implications. Christine Harold demonstrates the sophisticated rhetoric of particular strands of consumer resistance, collapsing the historical antagonism between capitalists and consumers. Olsen & Goodnight highlight the interconnectedness between various issues of public controversy and how consumer culture may help provide the necessary metonyms to unify these issues. We also learn public deliberation is not necessarily limited to rational, verbal discourse. Some advocates engage in playful, ambiguous protest, while others still favor traditional, bottom-up social advocacy. In the growing arsenal of consumer-movement rhetoric some remain dedicated to the marginalized and exploited, while others simply advocate a return to authenticity. Lasn & Klein advocate a combination of both, criticizing capitalist exploitation along with the vapid rhetoric of the culture industry. Heath and Potter criticize Lasn's notion of authenticity

altogether. Others such as Emily Potter focus on the rhetorical dynamics of specific ethical-consuming practices and their cultural implications. I argue rhetorical analysis provides the best framework to critique the production of civic engagement in the commercial messages of ethical consumption.

Preview

In our effort to critique ethical-consumer discourse most effectively we must first consider the developing trends in cause-marketing rhetoric. This dissertation focuses on the rhetoric of what I call civic branding, a developing strategy used to blur the boundaries between consumer and public culture. The strategy raises several important questions. How does cause marketing help transform consumer-subjects into citizen-consumer subjects? How does cause marketing help transform consumer practices into civic action? Finally, how does cause marketing influence the relationship between brands, consumers and social causes? All of these questions remain central to illuminating the rhetorical possibilities and cultural implications of contemporary ethical consumption. Conversely, their answers also depend on reconsidering some of our basic assumptions regarding the rhetoric of ethical consumption. Through critical-rhetorical analysis, specifically, privileging identification over Aristotelian logic, we can better understand how this commercial discourse aims to shape public culture.

This dissertation explores the cause marketing of three respective areas: coffee, clothing and cars, each represented by an iconic ethical brand. Chapter two investigates the Shared Planet Initiative of coffee giant, Starbucks. Starbucks offers an ideal text for three reasons. First, it is one of the most lucrative and universally recognized franchises in history. Its name and logo are ubiquitous to consumer culture, just as its storied success exemplifies the power of innovative brand marketing. Historically Starbucks did not so much insert its product into the world of

coffee as reinscribe coffee into the world of commercial culture. Given its eminent success in branding and market creation, it is no surprise the company has also led the pack in cause marketing. Second, the coffeehouse offers a unique space in Western culture, one which has historically generated subcultural discourse and civic engagement simultaneously (Cowan, 2005). Thus it appears only natural that a coffeehouse would help lead the foray into contemporary ethical consumption. Third, Starbucks' success is also mired controversy, seen by many as a bully to local businesses and an exploiter of cheap labor in the developing world. These dynamics have arguably compelled the franchise to begin its Shared Planet Initiative in 2008. Since that time it has served as one of the most innovative leaders of ethical branding, now perceived by many to be a model, corporate citizen. Thus Starbucks is at once an innovative brand, a space of civic engagement and an appropriator of public protest, all of which make it an ideal text for this dissertation.

I examine two Starbucks commercials, each representing a specific cause: getting out the vote and putting America back to work. Drawing on the work of Christine Harold, I argue Starbucks disrupts the dominant model of cause marketing by complicating the relationship between commercial and public culture. Specifically Starbucks transgresses the philanthropy model of cause marketing, employing two strategies outlined by Harold. First, it brands itself in the image of civic engagement through the use of ambiguous statements rather than employing a rational-deliberative model of advertising. Second, it reinscribes the Starbucks brand in a larger textual field by utilizing strategies of civic engagement, thus collapsing the public-private opposition. Yet it does so while also preserving the ritualistic form of capitalist consumption, thus forcing consumers back to the commercial well. By removing the ethical commodity Starbucks situates its own brand to signify civic engagement, while also reducing civic

engagement to signification. I argue this practice is indicative of a newly developing cause-marketing strategy, which I call civic branding, where civic engagement transcends the brand dynamic rather than merely the ethical commodity.

Chapter three explores ethical consumption within the world of fashion. Specifically I examine the clothing brand, American Apparel, founded in 1997 by controversial designer, Dov Charney. American Apparel has become a metonym for both independent fashion and ethical clothing consumption in recent years, as the company purports to be a leader in both labor and environmental practices. Regarding the former, its clothing is manufactured in a Los Angeles factory, made from U.S. fabrics, in a vertically integrated model. Regarding the latter, it strives to remain at the forefront of green production through a variety of practices including its recycling and use of organic cottons. The company leaves virtually no facet of ethical consumption untouched. The clothing brand also remains a leader of hip, urban fashion, merging ethical consumption with bohemian culture, thus crafting a unique ethical aesthetic. I argue the pluralist signification of the brand proves rhetorically productive.

I examine two aspects of American Apparel's ethical rhetoric: ethical fashion and cause marketing. First I examine the social and cultural implications of its no-logo aesthetic. Second I address its two political campaigns, Legalize LA and Legalize Gay. Drawing further on the work of Christine Harold I aim to illuminate the developing knowledge economy of signs circulating in ethical fashion. There is a potentially progressive quality of American Apparel fashion, as well as a fashionable quality to its civic engagement. I argue these tensions help facilitate a playful mode of postmodern, consumer activism. As a leader in both hip fashion and ethical consumption, American Apparel thus offers an ideal text to explore the burgeoning discourse of ethical fashion.

Chapter four explores the cause marketing of Japanese automaker, Toyota, creator of the Prius. Hitting the U.S. market in 2000, the Prius was the first mass-marketed hybrid automobile and arguably the most successful, serving as a synecdoche for hybrids and, quite possibly, the contemporary environmental movement as a whole. One might even label the hybrid the quintessential representation of ethical consumption, and Prius the quintessential hybrid. "Going green" has become the heart of ethical consumption, as well as a galvanizing force in popular and public culture, and it is essential to include a green commodity in this analysis. Prius' iconic representation of environmentalism makes it an ideal text for this discussion.

I examine two aspects of Toyota's ethical rhetoric: Prius cause marketing and social responsibility. First I address three Prius ads, one from each "generation" of hybrid models over the past decade. Next I address Toyota's Mothers of Invention program, where I critique three digital clips honoring its recipients for their innovative social commitment. Each commercial and clip tells a different environmental and civic-engagement narrative. Drawing on the work of rhetorical critic Sarah Stein, I argue these narratives function to reinscribe the Prius brand while facilitating a "hybrid" model of ethical consumption that is equal part technology and human subjectivity. Citizen-consumers are not so much encouraged to utilize hybrid technology as they are invited to participate in the Prius brand.

I conclude with a critical theorization of cause marketing today, addressing the rhetorical transformation from ethical commodification to what I call civic branding. Instead of merely commodifying civic action, civic branding fosters a triadic relationship between commodity, consumer and cause, all cooperating in a fortified brand dynamic more compelling to consumers and more elusive to critics than traditional rhetorics of ethical consumption. Brands now aim to transcend civic engagement rather than merely locate it in finite commodities. This rhetorical

shift demands an equally sophisticated rhetorical analysis to shed light on it. Drawing on the work of Celia Lury, I theorize civic branding as a critical extension of ethical consumption in the brand age. I argue that proper knowledge of brand-marketing rhetoric is necessary to appreciate the production of civic engagement in cause marketing and ethical consumption at the moment.

In summation, I hope to illuminate some of the cultural implications of ethical-consumption rhetoric today. I focus on the shifting strategies of cause marketing in the hope of educating citizen-consumers about their practices and how these practices are rhetorically situated. An effective analysis will thus facilitate a more responsible citizenry and consumer class. Finally I hope to compel consumer-cultural theorists and critics to think more carefully about rhetoric and how rhetoric shapes consumer culture in ways we have not yet theorized. Our challenge as critics is to provide theoretical traction on the steadily shifting terrain of ethical consumption so as to help conscientious consumers navigate their practices.

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CHAPTER 2

TWEAKING ETHICAL COFFEE: REMOVING THE CASH NEXUS FROM STARBUCKS CAUSE MARKETING

This chapter explores the cause marketing of coffee giant, Starbucks. Specifically I address its "coffee for voting" and Create Jobs for USA campaigns. Drawing on the work of Christine Harold, I argue Starbucks disrupts the dominant model of cause marketing by complicating the relationship between commercial and public culture. Specifically Starbucks transgresses the philanthropy model of cause marketing, employing two strategies outlined by Harold. First, it brands itself in the image of civic engagement through the use of ambiguous statements rather than employing a rational-deliberative model of advertising. Second, it reinscribes the Starbucks brand in a larger textual field by utilizing strategies of civic engagement, thus collapsing the public-private opposition. Yet it does so while also preserving the ritualistic form of capitalist consumption, thus forcing consumers back to the commercial well. By removing the ethical commodity Starbucks situates its own brand to signify civic engagement, while also reducing civic engagement to signification. I argue this practice is indicative of a newly developing cause-marketing strategy, which I call civic branding, where civic engagement transcends the brand dynamic rather than merely the ethical commodity.

The coffeehouse is perhaps one of the most iconic spaces of consumer culture. From the "Italianicity" of its caffeinated drinks to the French pastries often accompanying them, not to mention the worldly art and literature decorating its walls, the coffeehouse offers consumers a fantasy world of cultural make-believe. Along with their beverages, patrons drink in a sea of

social and cultural signs (Mathieu, 1999), while fueling themselves for more working and shopping. Yet unlike other capitalist spaces, the coffeehouse invites patrons to hang out, interact and philosophize, creating what Ray Oldenburg (1989) calls the "third space," a social mediate between home and work. The very physical act of drinking coffee—slowly sipping it with long breaks in between—facilitates a physical interaction between self and space that, while offering respite from the rest of fast-paced, consumer culture, has become one of its most iconic images. Coffee consumption also speaks to the power of exchange value, i.e., marketing a premium cup of coffee and the added cultural value of consuming it in style, a lesson learned during the Nineties when the coffeehouse aesthetic was reinvented and mass-marketed by the emerging behemoth, Starbucks. From hip, hit television shows such as *Frasier* and *Friends*, to time-encapsulating films such as *Singles* and *Austin Powers*, it is difficult to find a pop-cultural artifact of the Nineties unaffected by the renaissance of coffee consumption.

Today both coffee consumption and production occupy the site of controversy. Americans' recent obsession with premium coffee and coffeehouse patronage is seen by many as a sign of capitalist self-indulgence, not to mention a residual effect of being overworked (Tucker, 2010). The influx of designer coffeehouse chains lining the U.S. urban landscape has also arguably helped gentrify numerous cityscapes, forcing many independent retailers out of business (Harvey, 2009). Regarding production, coffee is the largest exported good of many developing nations and likewise the primary source of labor for many South Americans living in poverty (Reichman, 2011). These inequalities are arguably exacerbated through agreements such as NAFTA and CAFTA, easing trade restrictions along with labor and environmental standards (Hocking & McGuire, 2004). Starbucks, the world's largest coffee proprietor, has likewise become a primary target of criticism regarding these trends and policies. Yet the coffee giant has

not taken the criticism lying down, launching perhaps the fiercest of all cause marketing initiatives in recent history, Starbucks Shared Planet. Given Starbucks' cultural pervasiveness, coupled with its recently amplified interest in public affairs, its innovative rhetoric demands further critical attention.

This chapter explores the cause marketing of coffee giant, Starbucks. Specifically I address its "coffee for voting" and Create Jobs for USA campaigns. Drawing on the work of Christine Harold, I argue Starbucks disrupts the dominant model of cause marketing by complicating the relationship between commercial and public culture. Specifically Starbucks transgresses the philanthropy model of cause marketing, employing two strategies outlined by Harold. First, it brands itself in the image of civic engagement through the use of ambiguous statements rather than employing a rational-deliberative model of advertising. Second, it reinscribes the Starbucks brand in a larger textual field by utilizing strategies of civic engagement, thus collapsing the public-private opposition. Yet it does so while also preserving the ritualistic form of capitalist consumption, thus forcing consumers back to the commercial well. By removing the ethical commodity Starbucks situates its own brand to signify civic engagement, while also reducing civic engagement to signification. I argue this practice is indicative of a newly developing cause-marketing strategy, which I call civic branding, where civic engagement transcends the brand dynamic rather than merely the ethical commodity.

I begin with a brief history of coffee and the Starbucks Corporation, specifically the relation of each to public controversy, followed by a discussion of Starbucks' innovative marketing paradigm. I then analyze two ads, each representing one area of its civic engagement. First I examine the Starbucks "free coffee" campaign, in which patrons were rewarded with a free cup of coffee in exchange for their voting in the 2008 Presidential Election. Second I

explore the Starbucks Create Jobs for USA commercial, where patrons are encouraged to donate in exchange for a Create Jobs wristband. Finally I conclude that these campaigns offer rhetorical significance in that they complicate the traditional logic of ethical consumption, carrying significance for the production of civic engagement in commercial culture. According to the logic of these initiatives, civic engagement becomes a means of engaging with the brand rather than vice versa. Unlike philanthropic consumption, which utilizes the commodity as the entry point to philanthropy, this newer model of "civic branding" utilizes the signification of consumption as the entry point to the "civic brand." To help contextualize Starbucks cause marketing, I will begin by briefly outlining the political history of coffee and Starbucks' pioneering role in coffee distribution, along with some of the controversies each helped to produce.

History

The interplay between coffee and politics is nothing new. Indeed since coffee was first brewed it has been the subject of public controversy. Believed to be first consumed by Yemen Sufi monks during the mid-fifteenth century, moral authorities immediately attempted to ban the energizing beverage for its "mystical" powers (Hattox, 2000). Though coffee was never successfully outlawed, its consumption was relegated to the taverns where illegal activities such as drinking alcohol, gambling and prostitution were known to exist, thus placing a nefarious cloud over coffee consumption. Yet coffee soon became an important catalyst of mercantilism, serving as a major export of the East and a desired commodity of the West. By the eighteenth century, when coffee had become universally accepted, the taverns became sites of public discourse, central to the emerging public sphere, as famously outlined by Jűrgen Habermas ([1966] 1991). By the nineteenth century, the coffeehouse similarly became the haunt of the

English virtuosi, a group of social and intellectual elites, privileged with the task of philosophizing on the civic issues of the day (Cowan, 2005). While coffee had become a staple of the Western household by the twentieth century, the coffeehouse remained intertwined with the public sphere, utilized specifically by subcultural and countercultural circles interested in political and social discourse (Halberstam, 1993).

By the early Nineties Starbucks CEO, Howard Shultz, had successfully mass-marketed and mass-produced the coffeehouse ethos and aesthetic, initiating a renaissance of coffee consumption complete with traces of its bohemian, intellectual and civic-minded roots outlined above. The Starbucks lexicon helped circulate all of these signs, providing its consumers a pastiche of postmodern coffee culture, as beautifully outlined by rhetorical critic, Greg Dickinson (2002). Shultz capitalized on the simultaneous demands for quick service and authentic consumption by situating the "fast-food," corporate model in the garb of authentic, coffeehouse signifiers (Ibid). Consumers now had access to gourmet coffee on the go, while also invited to sit and carry on the civic tradition of coffeehouse patronage if they so pleased.

Yet civic engagement soon became more than coffeehouse pastiche, as the global ramifications of Starbucks' practices were implicated at the WTO protests in Seattle, December 1999 (see Held & McGrew, 2007). Here fifty thousand protesters flooded the streets to address the growing inequalities between rich and poor nations arguably exacerbated by institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (see Thomas, 2000). Yet NGOs were not the only targets. Corporations such as Starbucks, GAP and Nike had become the brand metonyms for many activists' frustrations with unrestrained global capitalism. Iconic images of their brick-smashed storefronts during the Seattle protests became a haunting reminder of these frustrations, exercised ironically by Starbucks' ideal clientele—

counter-cultural, civically engaged, young people—and exercised ironically in Starbucks' birthplace of Seattle (see Solnit & Solnit, 2009). It was thus at the Seattle protests where Starbucks was arguably forced into the foray of ethical consumption.

In 2000, months after the Seattle protests brought media visibility to the controversial practices of free-trade globalization and Starbucks' participation in this process, Starbucks teamed with TransFair and the Fairtrade Labeling Organizations International (FLO) to begin purchasing a limited amount of fair-trade certified coffee (Starbucks, October 28, 2008). The gesture may have helped bolster the coffee behemoth's fledgling public persona. Yet in 2001 Starbucks developed its own ethical sourcing guidelines, CAFE (Coffee & Farmer Equity), making it difficult to independently evaluate its ethical progress (Starbucks, 2012a). For example, while a 2008 article revealed that only 6% of Starbucks' sales were fair trade certified (Hickman, 2008), Starbucks nevertheless bragged that 86% of its coffee was CAFE verified in 2011 (Starbucks, 2012b). While Starbucks also boasts about being the largest purchaser of fair trade coffee, the statistic is less impressive relative to its size as the largest coffee proprietor. Nevertheless the company did make a number of significant changes to its coffee production. In 2004 it opened its first Farmer Support Center in San Jose, Costa Rica. Starbucks then switched to a more environmentally-friendly paper cup in 2006 (Starbucks, 2012a). Two years later it was forced to amp up its ethical marketing after receiving a firestorm of criticism for allegedly wasting significant amounts of water in its UK cafés (Sweeney, 2009). All of these programs would ultimately culminate into the 2008 Shared Planet Initiative, still practiced today.

The Shared Planet Initiative comprises a host of environmentally and economically philanthropic programs, operating in both Starbucks cafés and its international sourcing centers. Perhaps its most recognizable example is Ethos Water, which it acquired in 2005 (Starbucks,

2012a). Ethos Water donates five cents of every bottle sold to its water, sanitation and hygiene-education programs across the globe, thus far providing over six million dollars in support (Starbucks, 2012c). These programs focus specifically on regions where Starbucks coffee is produced. In addition to Ethos Water, Starbucks also famously launched its RED credit card in 2009, whose usage contributes to the RED foundation dedicated to fighting the spread of AIDS in Africa (Starbucks, 2012d). From water sanitation to AIDS and literacy, it is difficult to find a global issue Starbucks has not addressed over the past decade. Operating alongside Shared Planet is Starbucks' pioneering and longstanding health-benefits package offered to both part-time and full-time employees since 1988. The company has also encouraged all of its employees to participate in profit sharing since going public in 1992 (Shultz, 2011). Even after the economic downturn in 2007 compelled Starbucks to begin closing locations, Shultz remembers proudly, neither health benefits nor wages were ultimately diminished (Ibid). Innovative management and civic engagement have thus become important staples of the Starbucks brand. Starbucks' civic transformation may even be found on its coffee cup sleeves, many of which now simply read, "We proudly serve," over the iconic siren logo. Shultz purportedly decided to remove the Starbucks name from its logo to more accurately reflect its expanding business model (Ibid.), but the ambiguity of the statement is perhaps more revealing. The message on the sleeve now creates a political play on the word *serve*, ambiguously referring either to the commodity, coffee, or perhaps public service in general. In any case, Starbucks remains a perennial and innovative leader of corporate philanthropy and cause marketing in today's saturated environment of ethical consumption.

Starbucks CEO, Howard Shultz, also remains one of the more politically outspoken CEOs today. Most recently Shultz inserted his Starbucks brand into the national debt controversy,

encouraging baristas from the Washington DC area to write "Come Together" on all of their cups the day before the "fiscal cliff" deadline on the final week of December, 2012 (Eidelson, 2013). Shultz also sponsors and occasionally guest hosts the MSNBC morning talk show, *Morning* Joe. Perhaps Starbucks' most explicitly political engagement is its recent commitment to ending unemployment in the United States, as evidenced by its Create Jobs for USA Fund, analyzed later in this chapter. Thus while Starbucks' civic engagement is generally limited to non-controversial issues, and while Shultz strategically stops shy of partisan discourse, Shultz and the Starbucks brand nevertheless persistently blur the boundaries between commercial and public culture, as well as challenge public expectations of private enterprise and the possibilities of consumption.

Even before its onslaught of cause marketing Starbucks had long distinguished itself through its innovative marketing schema. Minimizing traditional advertising, it instead employs the more culturally savvy, product placement. When Starbucks does buy television airtime, it is often in conjunction with a specific cause, thereby creating the tone of a public service announcement rather than a commercial advertisement. The public quality is then visually reinforced by its grassroots aesthetic, often labeled zine or Do It Yourself (DIY), which has ironically become an important visual trope for the corporate mega chain. Like the coffeehouse, zine screen and DIY publishing share a long history in British and American subcultures. Unable to afford glossy print or high-quality photography, independent media are often limited by primitive technology, thus creating a bare-bones, minimalist aesthetic (see Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012; see also Zine World, 2012; see also Poletti, 2005). The zine-screen aesthetic is just one of many strategies Starbucks employs to help blur the lines between commercial and public culture.

Rhetoric without Argument or Antagonism

Historically advertising rhetoric is treated as an argument, which can be discussed in the traditional Toulmin model. A verbal or visual statement (evidence) is made about a particular commodity or service. The quality presented is presumably desirable to the potential consumer (warrant), who is likewise exhorted to purchase said commodity (claim). For example, *buy this soap because it is stronger, and stronger soap will make you cleaner*. Advertising is based on a model of rational deliberation. Advertisers have the task of persuading audiences to make an informed decision. Yet as many are well aware, this rational model is gradually shifting to an affective model of brand identity, popularized in the mid-Eighties when shoe companies Reebok and Nike began to emphasize brand image over shoe functionality (see Lury, 2004). Today consumers are not so much persuaded to purchase a commodity as they are invited to participate in a fantasy world of cultural values. As opposed to advertising, branding flouts the rational argumentation model.

Rhetorical theorist Christine Harold believes branding offers an important lesson to rhetoricians, particularly those interested in protesting commercial culture. To focus merely on rational deliberation is to ignore other important functions of rhetoric in a post-industrial era (p. 192). To protest commercial culture effectively, one has to recognize and adapt to the changing rules of the game. Harold extols the rhetoric of pranksters, a particular strand of "culture jammers" who "reconfigure the structures of meaning and production on which corporate media and advertising depend" (p. 209). Unlike traditional culture jammers, who aim to sabotage their opposition, "pranksters perform the art of rhetorical jiu-jitsu" (p. 191). They are playful rather than antagonistic, and their rhetoric is often ambiguous rather than deliberative. Pranking rhetoric performs two important functions. First it makes a statement rather than a rational

argument, thus eluding it from either retaliation or appropriation. Second, it reinscribes oppositions into a larger textual field, thus reorganizing the field of consumer culture (p. 191). As Derrida observes, oppositions historically privilege one side over another. Thus to protest commercial culture antagonistically is to acknowledge and reinforce its dominance, whereas pranking rhetoric forces audiences to rethink these relationships altogether.

One of Harold's pranking exemplars is the Barbie Liberation Organization's "gender-hacking" experiment. One Christmas shopping season, Harold notes, a group of "pranksters" surreptitiously swapped the vocal chips in Barbie dolls with those of G.I. Joe action figures, which were then repackaged and distributed unknowingly by department stores. Many young boys and girls consequently received a confusing surprise when opening their presents on Christmas morning. Obviously the prank was intended to interrupt the gender boundaries and assumptions facilitated by the toy industry. But for Harold, the prank's success came not simply in forcing children to challenge gender norms. More importantly, the playful nature of the prank escaped the old dichotomy between the culture industry and counter-cultural activists. The prank was not designed to topple the doll-making and action-figure industries but simply to make a statement. Further it utilized the tools of commercial culture to its own advantage. Pranking thus exploits the changing dynamics of rhetoric in today's media-saturated society rather than try to fight it.

Interestingly, just as Harold demonstrated protesters could learn from brand marketing, ethical-brand marketing may learn a great deal from the rhetorical critic. While branding has compelled marketers, activists and theorists to rethink many of their traditional assumptions regarding commercial culture, the burgeoning area of ethical consumption appears to favor the traditional, rational-deliberative model. Referring to what we may call the philanthropic model of

ethical consumption, experts find consumers willing to pay more for commodities whose proceeds go to support a worthy cause—cause marketing (Potter, 2011). The viewpoint reflects a rational-deliberative model of marketing and consumer behavior. In other words, by advertising one's support for a cause (evidence), one compels consumers to purchase its commodity (claim). Yet as marketing journalist Jack Neff (2012) reports, these statistics appear to be tanking, meaning consumers now appear less willing to pay more for ethically produced commodities. The new statistic may imply the rational-deliberative framework of ethical consumption is losing its effectiveness, which may in turn compel brands to reevaluate their ethical rhetoric and shift to a branding model of ethical consumption. I argue Starbucks cause-marketing offers one such innovative alternative to the philanthropy model, capitalizing on the new set of relations Harold describes. In the texts I explore below, Starbucks deviates from the philanthropy-purchase rhetoric to the rhetoric of ambiguous statements, highlighted by Harold. In addition, it complicates the private-public opposition by removing the cash nexus and reinscribing itself in a larger textual field of civic engagement. To illustrate this last point I will later turn to the work of critic, Constance Ruzich, who evaluates the authenticity of Starbucks as a third space. Finally I will conclude with a discussion of what I call civic branding, emphasizing commercial culture's import on the production of civic engagement in today's context of ethical consumption.

Voting Campaign

In October 2008, one month before a U.S. presidential election of monumental proportions in which the Democratic Party had nominated its first African American candidate, Starbucks engaged in a provocative campaign. Those entering the coffeehouse on Election Day would receive a free cup of coffee after simply telling the barista she or he had voted. No purchase necessary, no strings attached. The form of the campaign emulates a long tradition of

political candidates treating their voters and staffs to a cup of coffee on Election Day to help reward them after a hard-fought campaign (see Trent, Friedenberg & Denton, 2011). The innovative quality of Starbucks' offer was reinforced by the form of its one-minute ad. Utilizing a zine-screen aesthetic, a written text slowly emerges on the screen, accompanied by classical music. Most importantly, Starbucks does not present its signature until nearly the end of the commercial, thus creating a particularly ambiguous presentation:

> What if we ALL CARED enough to vote? Not just 54% of us, but 100% of us? What if we CARED as much on NOV. 5th as we care on NOV. 4th? What if we CARED ALL of the time the way we CARE SOME of the time? What if we CARED when it was INCONVENIENT as much as we CARE when it's CONVENIENT? Would your COMMUNITY be a better PLACE? Would your COUNTRY be a better PLACE? Would our WORLD be a better PLACE? We think so, too. If you CARE enough to VOTE, we CARE enough to give you a free cup of COFFEE (Period replaced by the image of a Starbucks coffee cup) Come into STARBUCKS on NOV. 4th, tell us you VOTED, and we'll PROUDLY PROUDLY (in even bigger font) give you a TALL cup of brewed COFFEE on us. You & Starbucks: It's BIGGER than coffee. ('Spot ends with an image of the Starbucks Coffee logo).

The entire message is set against a simple gray backdrop and an abstract piano solo, which reaches crescendo at the precise moment the ultimate purpose—and Starbucks' authorship—of the advertisement is revealed. That purpose is arguably to unify Starbucks coffee with the democratic process, articulated by rewarding voters with a free cup of coffee. It is a beautifully provocative ad. It is also a rhetorically seductive transformation of cause marketing, demonstrating Harold's two general strategies of making ambiguous statements and undermining

oppositions. First, rather than exhort its viewers to a particular social action, it simply situates the Starbucks brand in the ambiguous discourse of citizenship. Second, it undermines the private/public opposition by removing the cash nexus from its campaign, i.e., there is no cash transaction. Here I explicate three specific strategies that help accomplish these two general themes. First, the commercial employs disruptive verbal and visual techniques that reinforce the counterintuitive logic of the ad. Second, it interpellates citizens instead of consumers by adopting the form of a public service announcement and minimizing its commercial presence. Third, and most importantly, its fusion of public and commercial signifiers facilitate a civic-brand identification with Starbucks that goes beyond the traditional social-ethos rhetoric of cause marketing. I begin with the visual presentation of the ad.

The text begins with a provocative question: What if we all cared enough to vote? The written text does not appear in a traditional, linear, top-down, left-right format. Instead words appear out from all directions on the zine screen, interrupting old sentences to form new ones, often contradicting the meaning of the previous sentence by adding or changing a word. All of this unfolds with no trace of Starbucks' authorship until nearly the end of the ad. The playful sequence and disruptive presentation of the message synecdochally reinforces the campaign's ultimate effect of disrupting the logic of cause marketing and corporate rhetoric. While audiences may expect an authorial voice telling them what to do, they are instead posed a somewhat ambiguous question through an initially anonymous script. Authorial tone is minimized, asking seven questions and making only three declarative statements. The message enthymematically compels audiences to inscribe their own meanings onto the otherwise blank slate on which the text appears. Rather than advance any political view, Starbucks simply provides the canvas onto which the audience may construct its own vision of civic engagement, devoid of any partisan

political content. Audience visions of civic engagement are then poured into the Starbucks brand, whose only affiliation is civic engagement itself. The only statement of the ad: Starbucks is civic engagement, and civic engagement is Starbucks.

Second, Starbucks reverses the consumer-citizen model by interpellating citizens first and foremost, not mentioning Starbucks or even coffee until nearly the end of the ad. In the context of the upcoming presidential election, audiences may likewise engage the ad as discerning citizens about to vote rather than discerning customers about to buy. Whereas cause marketing traditionally inscribes the commodity into the fantasy world of civic engagement, the world depicted here lacks both a commercial product and an advertisement. Audiences are asked to picture a world where everyone cares rather than a world where everyone buys. Coffee becomes an afterthought rather than the foreground of the text. The Starbucks brand consequently emerges in the light of civic discourse rather than consumption, while consumption transforms into the expression of civic engagement rather than self-decadence. Never asked to make a purchase, the audience is only vaguely implored to socially engage. Insofar as citizens are encouraged to consume, their consumption becomes a reward for, rather than the necessary means to, civic engagement. Capital is removed from the transaction, empowering individuals as voters rather than consumers. Ordinarily, cause marketing situates the purchase as the primary vehicle of social action. Here, however, the purchase is completely nullified by the vote. Civic engagement is thus folded into the Starbucks brand and vice versa. Consumers are asked neither to buy nor participate in a corporate cause. They are instead invited to celebrate their civic engagement through the civic-branded consumption of Starbucks. The ritual of commercial transaction is repeated but now purely symbolic, as buying is replaced by voting and the commodity

transforms into a gift. The transaction facilitates Starbucks' stake as an authentic third space, which some have recently questioned.

In "The Language of Starbucks," Constance Ruzich (2008) criticizes the corporation for its inauthentic attempt at creating a third space, citing Oldenburg (1989):

> . . . [T]he development of an informal public life depends upon people enjoying one another outside the cash nexus. Advertising, in its ideology and effects, is the enemy of an informal public life. It breeds alienation. It convinces people that the good life can be purchased. (as cited in Ruzich, p. 11)

Ruzich takes issue with Starbucks as a genuine third space because it operates within the nexus of cash. Yet it is precisely this nexus of cash from which Starbucks releases itself through its voting campaign, ironically appearing the same year as Ruzich's article. By transgressing the dominant cause-marketing paradigm Starbucks unties the cash nexus dilemma of the third space it created. While the gesture certainly does not move the Starbucks *Corporation* outside the cash nexus, it nevertheless repositions the Starbucks *brand* into the realm of civic engagement. The absence of an ethical commodity allows for the emergence of Starbucks as civic brand, a nebulous site of public signification lacking any specific partisan content. Unlike commodities and causes, which are localized and temporalized, brands appear to transcend time and space. Because the brand is nowhere, it is everywhere. A cup of coffee is both spatially and temporally constrained, but the Starbucks brand transcends civic action.

Third, the campaign disrupts cause marketing logic by reducing citizenship to signification instead of turning commercialism into social action. Citizens are told simply to walk in and "tell us you voted" so as to receive their free coffee. For many, even that would be unnecessary as it has become customary to receive and wear an "I voted today" sticker upon

exiting the booth, allowing citizens to proudly signify their civic engagement for an afternoon. In the case of Starbucks, however, citizens are asked to signify their citizenship in exchange for their coffee, which then signifies citizenship and consumption simultaneously. Typically the model is reversed, utilizing the ethical commodity as the entry point to civic engagement. Here the commodity becomes the reward. Whereas philanthropic consumption teaches consumers to think like citizens, the coffee campaign teaches citizens to think like consumers. Each action signifies the other. The coffee signifies one's having voted, just as one's having voted signifies one's access to coffee, potentially leaving a residual association even after Election Day.

On one level, some may certainly argue the campaign presents no deviation from traditional marketing and cause marketing logic. The voting campaign may be viewed as a simple gimmick either for attracting new customers or perhaps upselling those who come in just for the coffee, all designed to bolster Starbucks' clientele. Both assumptions may certainly be true. I do not argue the commercial proves any radical break in marketing logic. I simply aim to demonstrate that a more sophisticated rhetoric is also at work, namely the commercial branding of civic engagement through a host of ambiguous statements and significations. Regarding any potential deliberative function of the ad, it is arguably naïve to assume most Starbucks consumers would only vote to receive a free cup of coffee. It is also unlikely that most consumers would cash in on their reward after having voted. Given the perceived elitism of Starbucks culture, it may appear low-class to take Starbucks up on its offer. So while capitalist motivation may certainly be present in the campaign, there also seems to be other rhetorical functions at work. One potential function is to complicate the public-private opposition by branding Starbucks in the signification of civic engagement. Here the signifiers of two

supposedly distinct spheres of American life collide, inviting consumers to rethink coffee consumption as a public act and rethink civic engagement as a sign of consumption.

Through all of these formal components Starbucks arguably attempts to brand itself as civic engagement. First, by disrupting audience's commercial expectations in the form of its advertisement, Starbucks challenges the conventional wisdom of cause marketing. Next, by breaking from the philanthropy model and removing itself from the cash nexus, Starbucks strikes a new transaction between ethical consumer and civic brand. Finally, by reducing civic engagement to brand signification Starbucks invites consumers to think consumption and citizenship simultaneously, each conveniently located in the brand itself.

Returning to Ruzich, the author concludes her 2008 appraisal of Starbucks by noting that while the company may lead the way in corporate philanthropy:

> Consumers who patronize the chain should [nevertheless] examine the in-store language for what it is—an advertising campaign, which to be successful must have an element of truth, but which, like all advertising, should be scrutinized and recognized as a high-stakes effort to manipulate, persuade, and sell. (p. 440)

While I agree with Ruzich both in her criticism of Starbucks and in her challenge to consumer activists, I argue simply that a more sensitive read of Starbucks cause marketing may provide alternative frameworks for understanding the developing rhetorics of ethical consumption. Ethical consumers are increasingly savvy, media literate and perhaps more guarded against old manipulative tactics. As corporations learn from the sophisticated rhetorics of consumer activism cause marketing will likely continue to grow more sophisticated as well.

Create Jobs Campaign

In its most recent campaign Starbucks tackles the U.S. economic recession, inviting individuals to donate five dollars to its Create Jobs for USA Fund. The fund was established to help fight unemployment and boost the American economy in the wake of the 2009 recession. It is in many ways a daring effort, given the potential divisiveness of the issue, thus generally discouraged by marketing theorists who instead advocate brand engagement with perceived innocuous issues such as recycling and ending world hunger. It also offers ironic fodder, given that Starbucks, a perceived bully of local businesses, is now determined to facilitate local business. In any case, I argue the primary function of the campaign is not so much to reach a particular financial goal, nor is it merely to boost coffee sales or strengthen the ethos of the Starbucks Corporation. While such goals may no doubt certainly be present, the larger aim is to advance Starbucks' mission to brand itself in a larger textual field of civic engagement, exceeding the historical limits of commercial philanthropy. It does this through two general strategies I explore below. First, it once again removes itself from the cash nexus by creating a public fund rather than exercising the traditional "philanthropy purchase." Second, it utilizes the iconic cause wristband to signify the Starbucks brand and civic engagement simultaneously. Both strategies highlight the discursive strategy I have begun to label civic branding, further discussed in my conclusion.

The Create Jobs campaign was announced through a provocative television commercial, adopting a similar form to that of the "Coffee for voting" commercial. With light, classical music playing in the background, a message begins to unfold in Starbucks' distinct, zine aesthetic. Authorship is once again hidden until nearly the end of the ad, so only the most literate consumers might now begin to identify Starbucks' aesthetic signifiers. Against a red canvas with

a white, cartoonish sketch of the United States placed center, a statistic in blue writing appears (bold font is used here to demarcate where Starbucks employs a deep blue):

> 8.3 % OF US REMAIN OUT OF WORK. TOGETHER WE CAN CHANGE THAT. SMALL BUSINESS: IT'S THE BACKBONE OF AMERICA'S WORKFORCE. WHEN IT GROWS JOBS GROW. AND WE HAVE AN IDEA THAT CAN HELP. DONATE $5 TO THE CREATE JOBS FOR USA FUND AT A **STARBUCKS** OR CREATE JOBS FOR USA.ORG. YOUR DONATION WILL GO INTO A FUND TO CREATE AND SUSTAIN SMALL BUSINESS JOBS IN COMMUNITIES ACROSS AMERICA. YOU'LL GET A WRISTBAND TO SHOW SUPPORT. **THE STARBUCKS DONATION** HAS DONATED $5 MILLION TO SHOW OURS. ALL OF US **WORKING TOGETHER**. INDIVISIBLE.

With Starbucks' authorship hidden until nearly the end of what we may call a public service announcement, the advertisement once again attempts to interpellate citizens rather than merely ethical consumers. The message provides readers only with economic statistics, nowhere mentioning commodities or services. The visual symbolism of the ad is most explicit: grassroots activism represented by the zine screen aesthetic, along with American indivisibility represented by patriotic colors and the wristband as a symbol of unity. Yet the aesthetic symbolism of the ad is far less intriguing than the underlying statement of the campaign.

The campaign is most noteworthy in its repeated attempt to reinscribe the Starbucks brand in a larger textual field exceeding the perceived limits of commercial culture. Rather than donate proceeds from the purchase of a commodity, the strategy of most brands, Starbucks establishes a separate Create Jobs for USA Fund. Starbucks even provides the campaign with a .org address, despite there being no legal requirement to do so. Rhetorically, the gesture further

repositions Starbucks alongside independent charities as opposed to charitable corporations. Whereas the voting campaign highlights coffee consumption devoid of capital, the jobs campaign highlights capital devoid of coffee. In both cases Starbucks transforms an otherwise philanthropic, capitalist transaction into pure civic action.

Still, the strategy of donation poses a potential threat, the absence of a brand signifier. Here the cause wristband comes into play. The cause wristband is typically associated with philanthropic agendas outside commercial culture. Perhaps most notable is Lance Armstrong's Livestrong Foundation, fighting cancer, represented by a yellow wristband. Other causes include fighting smoking, breast cancer, AIDS, racism, and bullying, along with supporting our troops and Tsunami victims. Wristbands are typically awarded/purchased upon donation to a given cause, each cause organized by color. Some wristbands, such as Livestrong, have become iconically recognizable. The practice thus carves out a visible space of civic engagement. The practice has merited both praise and blame over the past decade. While generating charitable donations on one hand, it also arguably reduces these charities to fashionable signifiers, not to mention cast a shadow of impropriety regarding the use of proceeds (see Pineda, 2012). For better or worse, cause wristbands have become an icon of civic engagement, as well as an important visual metonym for many causes, in recent years.

Interestingly Starbucks is the first corporation to explicitly commandeer such a cause, essentially swapping its coffee commodity for the charitable wristband. To succeed rhetorically (and legally), Create Jobs for USA must avoid any commercial transaction, thus asserting itself on even footing with other non-profit organizations. To that extent, while consumers are invited to make a donation alongside their purchase of coffee, the two transactions are emphatically distinguished. Citizens may also just stop in to make a donation, no purchase necessary. Thus

Starbucks is not merely helping to some good through its commercial enterprise; alternatively, it is attempting to reinvent brand in the image of civic engagement. Starbucks does not just do good; Starbucks *is* civic engagement.

At this point it is important to distinguish Create Jobs for USA from other corporate charities and foundations. What, for example, distinguishes it from the Ronald McDonald Foundation or other similar organizations? While there is no categorical difference per se, there are some noteworthy rhetorical distinctions. The Ronald McDonald Foundation, for example, clearly identifies as a philanthropic organization, whose work is made possible by it commercial enterprise. McDonald's customers are encouraged to spare their change into the charity box beside the register. Alternatively, Starbucks distinguishes its Fund from commercial philanthropy by avoiding the discourse of consumption altogether. No commercial or even coffee signifiers are found in the Create Jobs initiative. Starbucks even employs the patriotic colors of red, white and blue, as opposed to its iconic green.

Create Jobs for USA inverts the sequence of the former campaign, while preserving its rhetorical function of creating a genuine, third (and public) space. The first campaign offers coffee in exchange for civic participation, while avoiding commerce. The second campaign offers a wristband in exchange for a donation, while avoiding commodities. Capitalist consumption is replaced with civic engagement and public donations respectively. Most importantly, the customary exchange between both parties is preserved. The citizen-consumer must still enter the Starbucks coffeehouse and interact with a barista over the counter, exchanging one item for another. It is only the quality of the exchange that changes. In these two particular cases, the citizen-consumer offers his or her civic engagement for participation in the civic brand of Starbucks. The citizen-consumer is always directed back to the Starbucks brand.

In so doing Starbucks potentially deflects the criticism of ethical consumption as the mere commodification of social issues. Avoiding the commodity altogether, Starbucks reinscribes its coffeehouse as a genuine space of civic activity.

Conclusion

Starbucks demonstrates a significant aberration in cause marketing rhetoric. This is not to argue it presents a radical paradigm shift. Indeed many corporations, including Starbucks, still engage the philanthropy model of ethical consumption. Nevertheless it does compel us to reexamine some basic assumptions. In light of this analysis, cause marketing does not appear merely a rational argument about the ethos of a company. Nor does it appear merely the generation of pathos to help sell commodities or commodify civic engagement, as has been the popular argument (see Lewis & Potter, 2011). While these components are certainly present, there appears to be more going on. Drawing on the work of Christine Harold and some knowledge of brand marketing, we begin to see cause marketing in a new light. Starbucks attempts to brand itself in the very idea of civic engagement. By attaching itself to the democratic tradition of voting, for example, individuals are invited to participate in a new Starbucks brand, a brand of civic identity. Further, by appropriating the grassroots aesthetic and reinscribing itself within the field of civic engagement, Starbucks disrupts common assumptions regarding ethical consumption. Creative and unexpected stylistic devices such as sentence structure, tone, point-of-view, and zine-screen aesthetics all aim to transform cause marketing from perceived commodity peddling to genuine civic engagement. It aims to interpellate citizens instead of consumers. Starbucks' customary avoidance of television commercials, coupled with the public nature of these campaigns, further invites individuals to consume these ads as public service announcements rather than commercials. Most importantly, both campaigns carefully

deflect Constance Ruzich's criticism of the cash nexus by avoiding commercial transaction, thus bolstering the civility of the Starbucks brand. Yet it does this while preserving the necessary exchange between brand and customer. Consumers demonstrate civic engagement—voting and donating—as means to participate in the Starbucks brand.

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CHAPTER 3

DRESSING THE ETHICAL CONSUMER:

THE AESTHETIC POLITICS OF AMERICAN APPAREL

This chapter critiques the fashion aesthetics and social movement rhetoric of clothing brand, American Apparel. Drawing on the work of Christine Harold, I argue American Apparel offers a productive site of ethical consumption by reinscribing the commercial-public binary into a field of postmodern consumer activism. I critique American Apparel's participation in the immigration-reform and gay-rights movements, arguing that its deployment of pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure, facilitates a new brand of consumer activism where consumer pleasure becomes an expression of civic engagement. The many contradictions found within American Apparel's ethical rhetoric, I conclude, crafts a postmodern space of ethical consumption, what I call political nonchalance. Here consumers engage in a "free play" of ethical signification, thus disrupting and challenging many dominant assumptions about consumer activism.

As we watch consumer culture engulf many aspects of Western life, clothing perhaps remains the most sophisticated medium for the creation, experience and expression of consumer-cultural identity, specifically in the burgeoning realm of ethical consumption. It is difficult to ignore ethical consumption's recent impact on clothing fashion. Brand names such as 7 For All Mankind, Citizens of Humanity and True Religion indicate a potential paradigm shift in high-end clothing specifically. Whereas the last generation of denim was embodied by brands such as Diesel, a symbol of rugged modernism, today's emphasis on egalitarian signifiers reflects and

facilitates a desire to change the world one purchase at a time. One company, American Apparel, remains especially dedicated to branding itself in the discourse of civic engagement. A writer from *The Atlantic* recently explained how even Internet giant, Google, could learn from the clothier in how to ethically brand itself more effectively (Greenfield, 2012). American Apparel has served as one of the most provocative exemplars of both hip fashion and social responsibility over the last decade.

This chapter explores the rhetoric of civic engagement within the fashion devices, marketing strategies and political campaigns of American Apparel. Within this rhetoric there exists a productive tension between social activism and fashionable disengagement, a tension I call "political nonchalance." Rather than dismiss this tension as mere hypocrisy, I argue it facilitates a space of postmodern ethical consumption by playfully deflecting these signifiers off one another. Drawing on the ideas of Christine Harold I argue this fashion-rhetoric strategically obviates the historic fashion-anti-fashion antagonism, thus reinscribing the American Apparel brand into a more sophisticated field of textual production. First, in my review of the literature I discuss the rhetorical function of play within American Apparel's clothing style. Second, I explore the tension between social commitment and fashionable disengagement within its two public policy campaigns: Legalize LA and Legalize Gay. Finally, I conclude by discussing some potential implications American Apparel offers for the critique of ethical consumption.

Literature

In "Pranking Rhetoric: Culture Jamming as Media Activism," Christine Harold (2004) offers a critical alternative to oppositional protest. Rather than sabotage commercial culture antagonistically, she argues, some activists utilize its tools and logics to their own advantage, a form of "rhetorical jiu-jitsu" (p. 191). Whereas sabotage, and even parody, reinforces the

capitalist-activist binary, which then reinforces commercial culture's dominance within that binary, pranking reinscribes those binaries into a larger textual field. It utilizes the non-rational discourse of contemporary commercial culture to make a statement rather than a deliberative argument. Avoiding antagonism, it can be neither appropriated nor retaliated. Harold concludes that her title, "Pranking Rhetoric," is designed to implore rhetoricians to learn from pranksters, as well as commercial culture, evaluating rhetoric outside the traditional confines of rational deliberation. Taking Harold up on her challenge, I incorporate such a perspective to my critique of American Apparel.

Commercial culture has itself recently shifted from a rational-deliberative model of advertising rhetoric to one of brand identification. Following the innovative strategies of shoe companies Nike and Reebok during the Eighties, others quickly followed suit (Lury, 2004). Today brands (as opposed to merely companies) now privilege affect and identification over rational deliberation (Ibid). They create markets rather than simply cater to them. Brand names and logos become synonymous with cultural values. Consumers are invited to participate in a brand dynamic rather than merely utilize a commodity. Yet in the domain of ethical consumption, the majority of companies still appear to court citizen-consumers in the traditional, rational-deliberative style: *Buy this product so you can support that cause*. The rhetoric apparently attempts to commodify civic engagement rather than incorporate within one's brand dynamic. While the success of this model is evidenced by a dramatic rise in ethical consumption over the past decade, it is also arguably limited in its ability to mobilize consumers (Nan & Heo, 2009). Perhaps for that reason recent statistics demonstrate that fewer consumers are willing to pay more for ethically produced goods (Neff, 2012).

Alternatively, American Apparel's fashion-rhetoric is more playful and less dogmatic.

It does not merely appropriate ethical consumption; it brands itself in the field of civic engagement. It also appeals to the plurality of citizen-consumers rather than treat them as one-dimensional buyers. Specifically it plays with the double function of clothing as tool and clothing as fashion. Cultural critic Elizabeth Wilson (2000) writes:

> For everyone clothes are compulsory. This produces two kinds of individual at each extreme of the spectrum: those who hate it all, how were it not for social pressure, would not bother with the aesthetics of their appearance and who experience fashion as a form of bondage; and those who live it as compulsion, the fashion freaks for whom dress is a source of passionate interest, who are its addicts; "fashion victims," junkies of the art of self adornment. (p. 291)

Drawing on Wilson I demonstrate below how American Apparel markets itself to the latter, the "fashion victims," while simultaneously crafting a style of the former, the "puritans," signifying a conscious detachment from any aesthetic investment. Traditionally, Wilson observes, anti-fashion is perceived as modernist, e.g., punk style. It is blatantly antagonistic and thus undermines itself by playing into the very hands of those fashionistas it was designed to topple. Even those supposedly operating outside fashion discourse, e.g., the utilitarian hippie, help facilitate fashion by defining themselves in its opposition. This is precisely Christine Harold's point regarding the limitations of oppositional protest. Similarly, Wilson argues, conscientious consumers cannot transform fashion by rejecting it outright. They must instead find more playful means of complicating and commenting on fashion discourse.

In light of Harold and Wilson, I argue the sophisticated fashion-rhetoric of American Apparel demands critical attention. Above all, American Apparel avoids antagonism by creating a playful negotiation of fashion and non-fashion simultaneously. It presents a style of austerity

and understatement while avoiding the temptation to "sabotage" the fashion community. One the contrary, its clothing can be found mainly in higher-end shopping districts (American Apparel 2012c). Regarding austerity, its clothing depicts no brand logos to distinguish itself. Its t-shirts are sold in solid colors only, presenting no graphics or designs. Its plain clothes are uniformly situated on the racks, organized by color. One may even find the perennial denim work shirt to visually reinforce the rhetoric of solidarity facilitated by the company's labor-friendly practices outlined below. The entire aesthetic thumbs its nose at ostentatious fashion. Politically, one may view this style in the tradition of Kalle Lasn's and Naomi Klein's "no logo" movement (see Klein 2002; see also Lasn 1999). Yet as Harold observes, the no-logo movement is blatantly antagonistic, designed to topple the culture industry rather than embrace it. American Apparel, on the other hand, appears to poke fun at fashion while also participating it in, albeit somewhat ironically. To that effect, Creator and CEO Dov Charney stated on *Charlie Rose* that he aimed to sell fashionable clothes that happened to be produced responsibly rather than the other way around (2006). American Apparel recognizes itself within the discourse of fashion rather than as its antithesis. It facilitates a mode of ethical consumption that is conscientious but playful rather than antagonistically deliberative. Its goal appears to be to make a statement rather than bring commercial culture to its knees. Above all, it rejects the fashion-anti-fashion binary altogether. Clothing is merely *apparel*.

In light of the fashion-anti-fashion binary, Wilson (2000) goes further regarding the political possibilities "anti-fashion" dress:

> Is fashionable dress part of the oppression of women, or is it a form of adult play? Is it part of the empty consumerism or is it a site of struggle symbolized in dress codes? Does it muffle the self, or create it? (p. 293)

Wilson's answer is clearly in the middle, rejecting both the extreme notions of "free will" and "false consciousness." While both clothing fashion and its rejection are socially constructed, she argues, the latter can nevertheless offer opportunities to playfully challenge those social constructs. This form of fashion jiu-jitsu, to borrow form Harold, is precisely the strategy of American Apparel, who playfully appropriates strategies of ethical consumption while also participating in the domain of higher-end fashion.

Still, some caution against studying clothing as language altogether. Grant McCracken (1990) argues:

> . . . material culture as a means of communication is severely limited in the number and range of the things it can communicate. And it cannot exercise the rhetorical powers which language possesses . . . Material culture allows the representation of only a very limited number of things in only a very limited number of ways. And it cannot be used to express irony, metaphor, skepticism, ambivalence, surprise, reverence, or heartfelt hope. Material culture allows very little expressive scope. (p. 69)

While I share McCracken's position that clothing is not synonymous with verbal language, I do argue that a sophisticated reading of clothes will attend to its most subtle rhetoric, such as the production of those qualities McCracken excludes: irony, skepticism and ambivalence. All of these qualities are present in the American Apparel brand, as I will discuss below.

American Apparel

American Apparel was created in 1989 by Canadian fashion designer Dov Charney, who distinguishes his brand through a concerted practice of ethical production. Charney produces all his clothing through a vertically-integrated system of labor at a downtown warehouse in Los Angeles rather than outsourcing (American Apparel, 2012b). He also utilizes more sustainable,

organic fabrics to reduce his carbon footprint (Ibid). His most explicit political engagement has been his two campaigns, Legalize LA and Legalize Gay, which I discuss below. Together these practices and initiatives not only bolster Charney's ethos but also and more importantly, I argue, create a civic brand identity of social consciousness transcending his clothes. Through a variety of strategies, Charney facilitates a playfully complex brand of civic engagement that exceeds the binary rhetoric of traditional ethical consumption, i.e., the philanthropy model of *buy this shirt to support that cause*.

Charney's primary strategy is to complicate his public persona. His political activism is countered (or perhaps balanced) by his controversial practices, both in his personal life and his marketing strategies. Most notably, his advertising campaigns often feature young men and women in erotic photography, sometimes nude or exposing pubic hair. In addition to the sexually charged aesthetic of his featured models, Charney has also been the subject of multiple sexual harassment allegations, which have for better or worse fueled the American Apparel mystique (Millman, Ghebremedhin & Effron, 2012). To that extent, American Apparel recently displayed a billboard featuring Woody Allen, for which Allen sued. Some believe the billboard was an attempt to link Charney's and Allen's similar allegations of inappropriate behavior with young women (Martinez, 2009). While Charney denies this motivation, the clothing mogul nevertheless revels in his notoriety, evidenced by his cavalier demeanor when openly acknowledging sexual relations with his younger employees (Ibid.). On the American Apparel website Charney even displays some of his "favorite videos," including a series of provocative Calvin Klein adds featuring teenage models that were banned in the Nineties for their explicit sexual depictions of minors (American Apparel, 2012b). Interestingly, Charney encourages American Apparel consumers to submit personal photographs of themselves dressed in his clothes, which he then

posts online, a practice he argues empowers “real people” instead of professional models. Forever embracing controversy, Charney flouts the status quo by unapologetically attaching himself and his righteous brand to the controversial and taboo. While it is not my goal to interpret Charney’s behavior, I do argue these apparent contradictions in both Charney’s personal life and his company help reinscribe ethical consumption into a larger textual field. This delicate tension between austerity and fashion, between political commitment and nonchalance, produces the unique political aesthetic of American Apparel and potentially charts new territory for ethical consumption.

Political Campaigns

For the past decade American Apparel has affirmed itself as the clothing industry’s leading voice of protest and civic engagement. Its website invites visitors on a tour of its progressive, vertically integrated factory (2012d). In addition to its ethical production and righteous aesthetic, American Apparel actively participates in a host of social movements. Most notable are its Legalize LA (2012e) and Legalize Gay (2012a) campaigns, advocating for immigration reform and gay rights respectively. These initiatives, however, are not removed from the brand’s cloud of controversy outlined earlier. Legalize LA, for example, emerged when Charney became the target of a federal investigation regarding his alleged insourcing of undocumented workers believed to be living in the U.S. illegally (Preston, June 9, 2009). Legalize Gay, a campaign of sexual tolerance, emerged in the wake of allegations regarding Charney’s sexual exploitation of women. It thus appears even in the realm of politics the American Apparel mystique is fueled by ironic tensions.

The following section explores the productive tension of politics and fashion within American Apparel’s two prominent campaigns, Legalize LA and Legalize Gay. In Legalize LA

we find tensions between public and celebrity culture, between political action and sexual play. In Legalize Gay we find a tension between sexual liberty and sexual exploitation, as American Apparel attempts to sexualize the political while also politicizing sexuality. These contradictions, I argue, facilitate a postmodern space of ethical consumption vacillating between individual expression and civic engagement. I begin with Legalize LA.

Legalize LA

Perhaps no clothing manufacturer remains more deeply invested in immigration reform than American Apparel. Given its refusal to outsource labor, it is not surprising to learn of federal investigations affecting over 3,000 of its workers labeled as either unidentified or working illegally (The Associated Press, 2009). What its consumers may find perplexing, however, is how a socially righteous company could become the subject of these exploitative practices. Surprising no one, CEO Dov Charney has steadfastly defended his practices, even turning on the offensive by inserting his company into the immigration reform movement on behalf of his employees. American Apparel has subsequently, and rather ironically, become a consumer symbol of both American labor and immigration reform simultaneously. Connected to this issue is Charney's staunch anti-union position. While Charney claims his exemplary treatment of workers obviates any demand to unionize (see Dodero, 2005), others claim his exploitation of undocumented workers prevents collective bargaining out of a fear of being identified as illegal immigrants (see Paul, 2012). In any case, American Apparel continues to fuel a fire of controversy for both its critics and supporters. While its commitment to immigration reform was undoubtedly heightened the day of its September 2009 raid, when it was forced to fire 1800 employees illegally living in the U.S. (Preston, September 29, 2009), American Apparel proudly professes its support for the cause over the past eleven years

(American Apparel, 2012e). Charney bolsters his ethos by utilizing both his status as an American immigrant and his affiliation with the Hispanic community of Los Angeles, where his clothes are made. On its Legalize LA website one finds the digital equivalent of an eight-page political pamphlet advocating immigration reform.

At first glance the digital pamphlet appears oppositional and deliberative in nature, adopting the traditional antagonistic form of social protest rhetoric. The design is simple and low budget, as zine-screen aesthetics help cast American Apparel as a grassroots organization. Set against a bold, yellow backdrop, the document is bookmarked by two simple demands: "Legalize LA" (page 1) and "Immigration Reform Now!" (page 9), invoking the call-to-action rhetoric of a "zine" manifesto (see Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012, see also Poletti, 2009). True to the zine aesthetic, the majority of the pamphlet is black and white, interrupted twice by the iconic socialist colors, yellow and red, along with a few color photographs. The pamphlet in fact refers to American Apparel as an "Industrial Revolution." The simplicity of both its visual aesthetic and verbal content culminate in the form of working class solidarity pitted against the powerful, government machine. The pamphlet is thematically driven by the systematic government exploitation of American immigrants. Its inside content includes seven provocative texts: an open letter, a timeline of abusive U.S. immigration policies, a blueprint of American Apparel's vertically integrated factory, a list of famous American immigrants, a comparison-contrast between a legal and an illegal immigrant, a list of political figures antagonistic to immigration, and, finally, a list of actions the reader can take now. The pamphlet begins with Charney's open letter to hopeful sympathizers:

> Legalize LA is about recognizing, celebrating and embracing the diversity of Los Angeles, so essential to the city's success . . . However, despite the fact that so many

> experts agree that the productivity and hard work of immigrants improves our economy this issue has been grossly misrepresented by the media and certain politicians. Businesses are generally afraid to speak out because they're frightened of reprisals by government agencies, but at American Apparel we have not been able to sit in the shadows while the facts get distorted. Our dream for Los Angeles is that the over 1 million undocumented migrant workers who live here, and contribute to the city economically, culturally and socially will have the opportunity to become legal residents of the city, and the United States. (2012f, p. 2)

Unifying the government threat against both immigrants and companies such as his, Charney forges a marginalized identity between illegal immigrants and American Apparel. No longer willing to live under threat or see others exploited, Charney fights for the "over 1 million undocumented workers" across Los Angeles. The government raid thus transforms Charney's alleged exploitation of undocumented workers into corporate martyrdom driven by his support of the Hispanic community. From this perspective Legalize LA carries on the tradition of grassroots consumer activism, antagonistically opposed to the big government machine.

Yet despite its apparently oppositional tone and call-to-action rhetoric, the pamphlet also employs a playful quality of sexuality and celebrity culture. For example, in a collage of photographs featuring famous American immigrants there is an ironic juxtaposition of political figures and pop cultural icons. Salma Hayek, for example, photographed wearing a bikini with her breasts exposed, stands left-adjacent to Holocaust survivor, Elie Weisel. Albert Einstein is placed left-adjacent to nineties rapper, Slick Rick. There appears to be no consistent logic to the structure of the collage in which certain figures are emphasized (by way of a color photograph) over others. In fact the entire collage offers no coherent theme other than the immigrant status of

those depicted. The political and the technological are collapsed onto the popular and the sexual, no one figure or occupation favored over another. It is a truly postmodern collage of seemingly contradicting figures and messages. It is an ironic statement rather than a rational argument, and it is certainly designed get a laugh.

Page four offers a similar juxtaposition of the political and the sexual, featuring a blueprint of the vertically integrated American Apparel factory.

> Why does American Apparel care about immigration reform? Simple answer—humanity. We sew approximately 1 million garment workers per week. It takes 31 operators to sew one pair of denim shorts and six to sew a basic tank top. (p. 4)

The message is simple: American Apparel and immigrant labor are interdependent. Yet it is the visual image protruding out of the factory that is most interesting. Connected to the blueprint are two arrows moving from the fifth floor of the factory, through the blurb about the garment workers, down to a female model in a tank top and denim shorts. The purpose of the diagram is apparently to demonstrate the physical product—the denim shorts and tank top—of American Apparel's integrated labor. Yet the arrows conveniently point down to the women's buttocks, as she lies on her belly with the side of her breast exposed. Mouth agape with a flick of the tongue, the model is caught looking back at the arrows in delightful shock, as if her bottom were being physically groped by them. Once again, viewers are addressed more as hypersexual adolescents than serious citizen-consumers. Worker solidarity and sexual exploitation become interlocked. Even the arrows emanating from the factory blueprint follow a logical path from the factory floor to the commodities produced: first clothing and, second, a beautiful, sexualized model. The sexual image thus becomes the necessary product of an ethical commitment to industrial labor. Sex does not so much interrupt the message as complete it. While it is easy to dismiss the

message as just another attempt to market sex, the underlying logic of the photograph is perhaps more disturbing. The woman as sexual object becomes the embodiment of ethical labor and ethical consumption. It is commodity- and sexual fetishism all at once. The postmodern, ethical consumer is likewise provided a space to engage in political action and sexual consumption simultaneously.

Legalize LA blurs the lines between multiple competing spaces: private/public, citizen/consumer and austerity/decadence. American Apparel reinscribes these binaries into a field of postmodern, citizen-consumer engagement. Private consumption is elevated to a political act whereas public action is popularized and sexualized. American Apparel not only defends its questionable practices, but, in turn, transforms questionable practices into political gestures. The exploitation of labor, for example, is replaced by the exploitation of sex. Thus what initially appears to be a straightforward declaration of protest quickly becomes an almost nonsensical statement **about** ethical fashion. While the objective may appear to be immigration reform, the message ultimately serves only to brand American Apparel as a naughty iconoclast of traditional civic engagement.

Legalize Gay

In the November 2008 election, in which the United States elected its first black President, the state of California passed the controversial and divisive Proposition 8, which effectively made gay marriage illegal in California, overturning its Supreme Court's invalidation of year 2000's Proposition 22, months earlier (McKinley, 2008). Criticism of the referendum, which was upheld by the California Supreme Court in May of 2009, came swiftly, with many protesters blocking traffic outside the Supreme Court that afternoon (Schwartz, 2009). In addition to that of gay-rights advocacy groups such as GLAAD, an outpouring of support came

from the American public at large. Doing its part, American Apparel produced and donated over 50,000 gay-rights t-shirts, originally displayed at protest rallies around the city of Los Angeles (American Apparel, 2012a). Since then the clothing manufacturer has remained both vocal and visible in marketing its support for the LGBT community, regularly teaming up with organizations such as GLAAD and protesting on behalf of gay rights. This section explores American Apparel's campaign, Legalize Gay, arguing that its fusion of political activism and sexual marketing offers yet another playful alternative to traditional, antagonistic protest.

Legalize Gay, American Apparel's gay rights campaign emerging in the wake of Proposition 8, offers a linguistic play on the name of its preceding campaign, Legalize LA. On its website American Apparel proudly details its enduring political and commercial support for the LGBT community:

> American Apparel believes that sexuality should be celebrated, not condemned. When California voters passed Prop 8 in 2008, we let our community know we would support whatever stand they wanted to take. American Apparel believes in freedom, expression and equality, things that are inherently condemned in the prohibition of gay marriage. After printing a few hundred Legalize Gay t-shirts for a rally near our factory in downtown Los Angeles, the company received thousands of requests from people all over the world who asked for us to expand it.
>
> With many of our employees and customers identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, we are a company that is vocal about our support for the protection of gay rights. Scores of our employees were on the frontlines of protests in cities across America, handing out hundreds of Legalize Gay t-shirts to supporters, and putting them in our store windows in protest of violence against gays and discriminatory court

> decisions. We also had a lot of fun at PRIDE rallies and celebrations. We've since given away over 50,000 of these shirts, run protest advertisements nationwide and even partnered with HRC for their enormous march on Washington. (paras. 1-2)

All in all, it is a strikingly uplifting letter. We also notice in this manifesto strong emphasis on the joy of protest. Sexuality, for example, is not merely a human right but also a celebration. Charney goes on to mention how much fun they had at the rallies, reframing political activism from an ascetic act of defiance to a genuine source of pleasure. Readers thus learn that activism should be consumed pleasurably, just as the consumption of fashion should maintain an ethical dimension.

American Apparel then blurs the line between itself and its cause, thus complicating the public-private binary. Borrowing from the marginalized identity of the LGBT community, the company asserts:

> Sometimes what we do is controversial and not everyone agrees with our opinion. We heard this loud and clear when bigots shattered one of our store windows in Washington DC to intimidate us into pulling the shirts from our displays. It didn't work--and we're campaigning now stronger than ever. We hope that you can understand that we're sincere about this and that we think it's important, just like we are about Legalize LA.

Controversy here is ambiguous, referring both to American Apparel's support for the LGBT community and its hypersexual marketing. Invoking the marginalization of the former, American Apparel positions itself as the martyr, physically threatened for both its political support for gay rights and its own sexual persona. Sexual marketing is equated with the struggle for human rights. Rather than align the LGBT community with conservative American values, the strategy often employed, American Apparel instead pulls the community back into the controversial fight for

free sexual expression. The controversial, hyper-sexuality of American Apparel likewise translates to a public cause on equal footing with gay marriage, as the two become interchangeable.

Shortly after the court ruling, American Apparel armed consumer-protesters with thousands of t-shirts displaying the slogans, "Gay-O.K." and "Legalize Gay." These slogans, I argue, help fuel the contradictory tension of consumer activism through playful self-mockery. Gay-O.K. is of course a play on "A-O.K.," an expression thought to be derived from flight controllers in the Sixties (Frank, 1970) but now used more ironically to communicate one's doing well without sounding overzealous. The expression has an air of lightheartedness, accompanied by a now playful hand gesture and sometimes a wink. The playfulness of the expression arguably offsets the solemnity of the protest, almost mocking itself. Rather than protest in a fierce, unrelenting tone, American Apparel utilizes the appropriately "ironic" rhetoric of hip condescension. Protesters are invited to walk the line between political engagement and ironic detachment, between passionate commitment and learned nonchalance. I call this tension political nonchalance. The contradictory tone allows consumer-protesters to support their beliefs while remaining incredulous to the possibilities of traditional civic engagement. They can suspend their political judgment in the garb of hip, ironic fashion while also performing the role of a concerned citizen. This does not imply their political commitment is disingenuous or "mere performance" but, on the contrary, that genuine conviction requires ironic suspension to remain attractive in a postmodern, consumer culture (Eagleton, 2004). American Apparel walks the line by scoffing at traditional civic engagement while simultaneously fueling the political commitment of consumer culture.

The campaign's title slogan, Legalize Gay, is equally provocative. While on one hand it makes a clear, un-ironic demand to the State, it also has a silly, catachrestic ring to it, inserting an adjective precisely where we expect a noun to go. Thus what begins as an explicitly political demand immediately turns on itself and adopts a playful tone. It playfully invites the reader into ironic social commentary. This negotiation of politics and play is perhaps best exemplified in the five photographs featured on the Legalize Gay website, deftly alternating between images of political defiance and sexual consumerism. The photographs—all featuring twenty-something, attractive models displaying either of the two slogans—alternate on a perpetual loop with no clear beginning or end. The "first" photograph features a young Caucasian man giving a thumbs-up, wearing a carefree smile. Ironically, while this pose may better fit the Gay-O.K. slogan, this model is wearing the Legalize Gay tank top, thus complimenting the slogan's directness with the silliness of the gesture and the sexuality of more skin exposure. In the second photograph, a young Caucasian man appears to be taking off his Gay-O.K. shirt, the collar of which is just covering his mouth. Interestingly, the photograph combines the sexuality of undressing with the politics of gay rights, mouth covered so as perhaps to repress the sexual identity he is simultaneously exposing as he undresses. The physical depiction creates a sexual tension between what can and cannot be spoken/expressed. The gesture may also be interpreted as a rejection of traditional free speech (covering his mouth) in favor of sexual expression (skin exposed). In that case the free expression of sexual fashion succeeds where conventional public discourse and oppositional social protest fails (a picture says a thousand words). Both photographs thus capture the tension of political nonchalance, perpetually deflecting the qualities of each onto the other. Each photograph is carefully situated between the sexual and the political,

resisting the temptation to lean too far in either direction. It rejects both social defiance and blissful ignorance.

The next two photographs are the most explicitly political. The third photograph features a woman of color sitting on a stool, looking defiantly into the camera, nothing overtly sexual or silly taking place, aside from wearing a pair of noticeably tight, skin-colored pants. Similarly, the fourth photograph features a young man of color also standing and looking defiantly into the camera, wearing a box-cut, black t-shirt displaying the Gay-O.K. slogan. This photograph appears the most explicitly defiant of the bunch, yet still not overly antagonistic. In light of the contrast between the first two and second two photographs one might argue that employing models of color provides a set of limitations to the campaign. The defiant, non-ironic poses of the models of color perhaps reflect the racial minorities' struggle for assimilation into the realm of ironic consumer culture. While their images are rhetorically viable to facilitate American Apparel's political dimension, their participation is nevertheless limited by a lack of cultural capital preventing them from operating playfully. In either case, the latter two photographs offer a necessarily defiant contrast to the silliness of their counterpart.

The fifth and final photograph features Isis King, known as the world's first transgendered model (Duerson, 2012). Assigned male at birth, King—of mixed racial origin—self-identifies not as gay but instead as being "born in the wrong body" (Burra, 2012). A former "cross-dressing" runway model, King did not undergo her sex-change operation until 2009. Shortly after, she was discovered by former supermodel Tyra Banks and in 2011 featured on her popular television show, *America's Next Top Model*. In her Legalize Gay photograph King is shot seductively leaning in toward the camera. Wearing no pants, a female-cut t-shirt with higher sleeves and a lower collar barely drapes over her midsection, which may or may not be wearing

underwear. That particular question is overshadowed by the greater mystery of what exactly lies beneath King's t-shirt. King truly personifies the entire critique thus far, reinforcing American Apparel's blurring of cultural boundaries. More than just a gesture of solidarity with the LGBT community, King's mere physical presence embodies a host of tensions precluding her from being categorically marked: tensions between masculine/feminine, hip/plain, distinction/solidarity, private/public, and, of course, consumption/activism all help fuel the rhetorical force of the photograph. Appropriately, the deployment of King offers more questions than answers. Transgendered and biracial, King's mixed identity remains in perpetual deflection, serving as the ideal body type in a postmodern consumer culture. In addition to undermining racial and biological binaries, King's presence is at once political and sexual, marginalized and popularized, a pop icon of sexual equality and consumer culture.

Finally, the pace and sequence of the photographs contribute to the overarching form of the photo shoot, overwhelming viewers with a mix of messages. The five photographs loop at a fast rate, each appearing for about a half-second before being interrupted by the next. Not given a chance to experience any one photograph individually readers instead consume them as a whole. The photographs create a collage of images and interactions with the campaign, ranging from silly to sexual to defiant. Yet these interactions are not isolated so much as blurred, thereby combining these seemingly disparate interactions into a pluralized aesthetic of political nonchalance.

Through the aesthetic of political nonchalance American Apparel helps transform the space of consumer activism into an opportunity for political play. To assert one's sexual and political identities become one and the same. As consumers place increased demand on ethical production, the ability to collapse the space between civic engagement and sexuality helps make

ethical consumption more conducive to the fashion industry, a facet of consumer culture dependent on selling sex. Thus even while engaging in more traditional forms of social protest, i.e., policy-driven rhetoric, American Apparel casts a consumerist shadow of sexual play over the gay rights movement, while also casting a political shadow over the consumption of sex. It refuses to let itself be categorically marked.

Conclusion

In conclusion, American Apparel offers an important site of what could arguably be called postmodern ethical consumption. Drawing on the work of Christine Harold we see that American Apparel reinscribes traditional binaries into a larger textual field of civic engagement. Its stylistic devices, for example, comment on the fashion world without opposing it. In the words of Harold, it engages in comedy rather than parody. It pokes fun at the world but in a playful rather than antagonistic tone. It is perhaps the fashion exemplar of what some call the ironic generation, forever embracing a state of incredulity. It neither buys into the fashion world and its hyperbolic promises nor fully rejects them. In the world of American Apparel clothing becomes neither modern fashion nor its rejection: it is simply apparel.

We also learn from its playful rhetoric of social activism. Even as it engages social movements American Apparel maintains its ironic disposition. While the brand sometimes incorporates anti-government rhetoric, it ultimately advocates a form of free play more than anything else. It offers more statements than arguments. Its rhetoric is above all aimed at facilitating a brand image of political nonchalance. It folds the practice of ethical consumption into a world of consumer decadence and exploits their contradictions to avoid binary labels. It obviates the threat of demarcation both literally (no logo) and figuratively (mixed messages of

protest). Its ability to always suspend judgment, even while engaging a social cause, becomes the fuel of cultural production for the American Apparel brand.

American Apparel carves out a postmodern space for the construction of cultural identity within the practice of ethical consumption. Its signifiers deflect off one another creating a perpetual play between political commitment and fashionable nonchalance, what I have labeled political nonchalance. In an age where both political conviction and pure decadent consumption equally appear to be in jeopardy (Eagleton, 2004), the brand reinscribes the two into a pluralist aesthetic of ethical consumption. American Apparel reinscribes the traditional binary rhetoric of ethical consumption into a complex site of cultural signification whose political possibilities remain to be seen.

Finally, I do not attempt to claim American Apparel is either good or bad for the practice of civic engagement; one may certainly argue either side. I argue that what makes the brand incredibly seductive particularly, to young, socially-conscious consumers, is its ability to be good and bad simultaneously. It does this primarily by creating a *brand* of civic engagement rather than merely offer an ethical commodity. American Apparel tweaks the traditional ethical marketing framework by refusing to assert itself as any one thing or attach itself to any one image. Thus it connects ethical consumption to the practice of consumer branding, lending it a sophisticated quality more difficult to critique, either as scholars or ethical consumers. For better for worse, American Apparel complicates the domain of ethical consumption by engaging a rhetoric that demands further critical exploration. The transformative potential of this rhetoric remains to be seen.

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CHAPTER 4

FUELING ETHICAL CONSUMPTION:

CONSUMING AS SOCIAL ACTION IN TOYOTA CAUSE MARKETING

This chapter critiques the cause marketing and social responsibility of Toyota Prius and Toyota respectively. I examine three Prius commercials and three Mothers of Invention narratives. Drawing on the work of rhetorical critic Sarah Stein, I argue Toyota reinscribes consumption as social action through the verbal and visual narratives of its commercial campaigns and social programs. These narratives specifically aim to do three things. First, they displace traditional civic engagement while privileging technology as the new environmental subject, a rhetorical "hybrid" of entrepreneurial technology and traditional civic engagement. Second, they aim to interpellate citizen-consumers as peripheral characters in a brand narrative rather than as the primary agents of social change. Third, and finally, these narratives aim to transform Prius from an ethical commodity to civic brand.

Perhaps no area of ethical consumption is more vigorously engaged than that of environmental sustainability. Amid the various calls to make trade fair, reclaim public space and increase consumer transparency the imperatives to go green, reduce our carbon footprint and end global warming absorb the most consuming energy. One Nielsen survey shows out of eighteen given causes, socially-conscious consumers care most about environmental sustainability, representing the interests of 66% of those interviewed (Nielsen, 2005). It should then come as no surprise that the United States' prominent left-leaning party, led by famed consumer activist, Ralph Nader, is labeled not according to the traditional leftist colors of red or yellow, but instead

the environmental symbol of green, using its environmental commitment as a metonymical umbrella for its diverse political investment. “Going green” has become an American symbol of civic engagement, evidenced by Barack Obama’s numerous green initiatives unparalleled by any former American president (White House, 2012). Further, despite its sometimes political dimension, particularly regarding the contested issue of climate change, going green is largely a bipartisan cause, enveloping a larger and more diverse demographic of citizen-consumers (The New Economics Foundation, 2005). Interestingly, today, a Google search of ‘go green’ will retrieve almost two billion links, fifteen times those of ‘fair trade,’ and vastly greater than those of ‘consumer activism’ or ‘ethical consumption.’ For all of these reasons it is difficult to overstate the force of green consumption in contemporary consumer culture.

If going green best represents American ethical consumption, perhaps no commodity better represents America’s cultural heritage than the automobile. Responsible for inspiring the “Fordist” model of production, which altered both manufacturing and consuming practices in the U.S., the cultural impact of the American automobile is just as great (Ceiler, 2008). No visual idiom better represents the American Dream than does the second half of President Hoover’s campaign slogan, “a car in every garage.” Occupying a special space in Americana from nostalgia films, *American Graffiti* and *Grease*, to the iconic Sixties sounds of the Beach Boys, driving an automobile is just as much an American pastime as it is a mode of transportation. Yet the automobile has also become a site of political contestation in America, specifically regarding public transportation. Ironically, just two months before the Beach Boys performed “I get around” on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, President Johnson signed the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964, preventing further attempts of General Motors’ suspected monopolization of public transportation. The American automobile had become a cultural icon and a political object

simultaneously. Yet while access to public transportation was primarily an economic concern in the Sixties, it has transformed into an environmental initiative today, as having fewer automobiles on the road entails fewer carbon emissions. While for some the automobile remains a symbol of individual freedom, for others it has come to represent a nightmarish counterpart to American Dream—greater consumption equals greater environmental destruction. The rhetorical life of cars is thus more sophisticated than ever before, particularly in the realm of environmental consumption.

All of this leads inexorably to the Toyota Prius, perhaps the most iconic of all commodities in the symbolic universe of environmental consumption. Perhaps no single commodity better exemplifies environmental consumption than the Prius. First produced in 1997, and introduced to the U.S. in 2000, the Prius became the first mass-produced hybrid automobile, as well as perhaps America's most prominent symbol of environmental sustainability. The preeminent innovator of environmental consumption, Prius provides an ideal text to examine the cultural implications of ethical consumption. Prius popularity is evidenced first by its sales, moving over three million units to date (McIntyre, 2012), and second by the growing hybrid market, now accounting for over two percent of the automobile industry (Bunkley, 2012). Yet perhaps most impressive is its cultural impact. Symbolizing environmentalism for some and elitism for others, the Prius is often parodied in popular culture (see *Saturday Night Live*, 2010; see also *Left Lane News*, 2011). The satirical *South Park* (2006), for example, famously lampooned the "pious" Prius for its overwhelmingly "smug" consumers, while also acknowledging the need to address global warming. Love it or hate it, no one can deny Prius' profound cultural impact over the past decade. Likewise a rhetorical analysis of its environmental and ethical rhetoric will provide important insight into its cultural implications.

This chapter explores the cause marketing of Toyota Prius and Toyota respectively. First I examine three generations of Prius commercials**,** reflecting some of the dominant marketing themes since its inception. Next I critique Mothers of Invention, Toyota's latest social initiative. Drawing on rhetorical critic Sarah Stein's critique of the 1984 Apple Macintosh commercial, I argue Toyota aims to reinscribe consumption as social action, privileging play and entrepreneurship over traditional civic engagement. Citizen-consumers are thus relegated to peripheral characters in the Prius narrative while the protagonist becomes Prius itself. We may find this strategy in both Prius marketing and Toyota's social responsibility. In both cases Toyota privileges the social progress of private technology over that of over publicly oriented civic engagement. On the contrary, civic engagement is valued only in the form of "entrepreneurial" activism. The dynamic helps facilitate a "hybrid" citizen-consumer, whose full potential for social change is only made possible by entrepreneurial technology. While consumption is transformed into genuine social action, traditional civic engagement is displaced and rerouted into the Prius brand.

The second part of my argument pertains to the developing rhetoric of brand marketing within the realm of green consumption. It draws on the rhetorical shift from advertising to brand marketing over the past three decades (Lury, 2004). Whereas historically companies made rational appeals to sell their commodities and services, today companies invite consumers to participate in the fantasy world of the consumer brand. I argue Toyota has incorporated precisely this model to market the Prius. Instead of merely advertising the environmental benefits of the Prius commodity, Toyota brands Prius as civic engagement. In turn, Prius becomes environmentalism itself. To that effect, Toyota's visual deployment of the Prius car helps transform the Prius-as-ethical-commodity into Prius-as-civic-brand. Civic branding, I contend, is

a rhetorical dynamic facilitated between the commodity, the consumer and the social issue, in this case environmental sustainability. All of these components are rhetorically situated to create the Prius brand. Learning from the lessons of brand marketing, Toyota compels consumers to identify with and participate in the civic brand of Prius more so than merely purchase an ethical commodity. I argue this rhetorical strategy sheds a new light on ethical consumption and invites citizen-consumers to participate in important, though not necessarily positive, new ways. I conclude with a discussion of some potential implications of civic-branding rhetoric.

Moving Forward

To fully appreciate Toyota cause marketing one must first consider the unique quality of "driving green." Unlike clothing and coffee, the ethical life of a Prius does not begin or end at production. Instead it is truly the act of consuming—that is, driving—a Prius that enacts its ethical dimension, fuel efficiency**.** Ethical consumption does not occur until one uses the commodity. Prius consumers are likewise encouraged to address climate change by driving their automobiles—by staying in motion. The Prius becomes the literal and figurative vehicle for social change, transforming consumption into genuine social action. Rhetorically it also invites consumers to see past the mere "ethical purchase" (see Lewis, Inthorn & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005) to viewing ethical consumption as real activity. It is not surprising that Toyota's slogan, "moving forward," offers a linguistic play on social progressivism and physical transportation, the two of which, like hybrid technology, are synergized into a singular driving experience. This rhetorical theme can be theoretically grounded in the work of Sarah Stein.

In 2002 the Quarterly Journal of Speech featured Sarah Stein's critique of what is now perhaps the most famous television ad in history, Apple's iconic, "1984" commercial. Drawing on Maurice Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric, Stein argues the ad succeeds in

constituting a "narrativized subject-as-agent," the capitalist consumer seeking individual freedom through Apple's revolutionary computer technology. Stein also draws on Walter Benjamin's concept of the "dream image," through which Apple reinserts computer technology into the cultural imaginary devoid of its dystopic connotations. Apple's dream world actively diminishes public fears of dehumanization then circulating around computer technology. Embracing the form of science-fiction dystopia, while reversing the dominant trope of computer takeover, Macintosh offers the Apple personal computer as a tool of consumer liberation.

Set against the backdrop of the Cold War, the groundbreaking Macintosh commercial exploits a pun between its current year and the George Orwell dystopia, *1984*. The oppressive dystopia featured in the ad represents Apple's competitor, IBM, while taking the form of the United States' communist antagonist, The Soviet Union. Additionally, Stein argues, Apple had to contend with a growing cultural technophobia exacerbated in part by science fiction films such as *Blade Runner* and *Terminator*, facilitating the perceived possibility of a technological replacement of the human body. In response, the ad appropriates iconic images from such movies to reinscribe computer technology as a tool of freedom rather than captivity. The climax of the ad occurs when a blond, female athlete carrying the Soviet symbol of the hammer runs across the screen in the form of the javelin competition, invoking the upcoming, 1984 Olympics. Using the master's tools to take apart the master's house, the woman fearlessly smashes a giant screen of ideological dissemination, freeing individuals from their collective state of mental and physical oppression. Apple consumption becomes revolution. Equally important is its dramatic contrast between stillness and movement. The athletic heroin is the only character depicted in physical motion. Stein argues this serves to offset two assumptions: first, computers are primarily for men, and, second, computers will eventually render the human body obsolete. We

may perhaps go further in observing that the physical motion of the protagonist also serves to reinsert computing itself as physical action. Here I draw on Stein's critique to explicate how Toyota employs a similar trope of narrativized subjectivity in three generations of Prius commercials. The key difference, however, is that Prius itself becomes the subject of its own narratives, while relegating its human drivers to peripheral characters in its story.

In 2000 Toyota began U.S. distribution of its much anticipated Prius hybrid. Needing to make a splash, it dramatically introduced the Prius as the new environmental subject. Set at an oil refinery, viewers find themselves in the middle of giant oil rigs, looking up at the intimidating machines at work. Four seconds into the thirty-second spot a Toyota Prius bursts onto the scene, weaving throughout the industrial activity. A narrator reads:

There's a change happening. It begins with Prius, Toyota's revolutionary hybrid vehicle. And it continues with more vehicles rated most fuel efficient in their class than any other brand. Transportation is finally evolving.

Toyota invites consumers to watch the Prius drama unfold. No humans present, the oil rigs play the part of the villain, and Prius the hero. When the Prius arrives at the refinery with the help of its friends lined behind it, the giant Goliath-like drills begin to self-destruct, eventually scurrying off and abandoning their workplace. The message of the ad is as simple as it is hyperbolic: hybrid technology entails the end of oil dependency. Yet more profound is Toyota's introduction of the Prius as subjective agent, sent to save civilization. At no point in the narrative are human beings depicted or referenced. Ironically, while Apple inserted the active human body as its narrativized subject, Prius borrows the form of this ad to privilege technology as the new environmental subject. Downplaying human agency, Prius becomes both agent and agency all at

once. Human displacement will mark the dominant trope of both Prius marketing and Toyota's social responsibility.

When Toyota released the second generation Prius in 2004 it launched an even more aggressive marketing campaign in the United States. Perhaps its most memorable commercial to date is an ad strongly reminiscent of Apple's "1984" commercial. In the ad, people from various corners of the globe are depicted in everyday life, bodies in motion but strangely moving nowhere. Beginning with an image of automobiles apparently stopped in highway traffic, viewers are quickly struck by the logical contradiction of the characters' spinning wheels. Viewers learn accordingly that the vehicles are not so much stopped as going nowhere. The picture then shifts to urban pedestrians out for leisurely walks and jogs. Once again, however, while their legs are in stride their bodies remain incapable of forward progress. Staged against iconic backgrounds such as Buckingham Palace and downtown Tokyo, each image depicts a unique cultural artifact of the world in paradoxically still motion. As the camera travels across the globe a narrator declares:

> It's been a long time since transportation truly advanced. The world has been moving; it just hasn't been moving forward. But now there's good news for planet Earth. The gas-electric Prius with hybrid synergy drive. Low emissions, high mileage, and you never plug it in. It's one small step on the accelerator, one giant leap for mankind. Now that's moving forward.

Enforcing its thesis on stagnant technology are two iconic images: Ronda, Spain's "New Bridge," completed in 1793, and an American locomotive, both of which appear stuck in time as their pedestrian onlookers remain equally inert—feet in motion but inexplicably going nowhere. The visual icons of modern technology create an ironic juxtaposition between old and new, where

eighteenth century innovation finds itself outdated. Once symbols of progress they operate now as historic artifacts, attracting seekers of nostalgia rather than functional use. A group of children run in place while looking up at the locomotive in awe, perhaps to imagine a simpler time. Similarly, Buckingham Palace—a symbol of the British monarchy—is visited not for its political import (embodied by Parliament Square) but for its cultural iconicity, as visitors pay ironic homage to old the world politics of empire and aristocracy. Yet while individuals now consume these former objects as nostalgic artifacts, one outdated commodity remains earnestly consumed: the gas-guzzling automobile. Ironically, this outdated and environmentally-devastating tool of transportation is still utilized by the most technologically advanced corners of the globe, including Tokyo Japan. Civilization stands in need of an innovative miracle. Enter the Toyota Prius.

Exactly halfway through the commercial a Toyota Prius valiantly enters the frame, making a similar entrance to that of its 2000 ad. Boldly weaving through traffic the Prius becomes the only depicted object truly in forward motion. As it enters the frame music speeds up, accelerating the commercial's audio and visual tempo as well as foreshadowing potential liberation. The Prius charges through the downtown cityscape, as if on a mission to save planet Earth, and then grabs the attention of two pedestrians, awakened from their myopic daze. It is the only moment of the ad in which any person appears to acknowledge the outside world. Giving a perplexed glance, the two become fleetingly aware of their inactive motion, made possible by the "Toyota in action" (also the name of its social responsibility website). Only by standing in contrast to the active automobile do the passive human agents begin to recognize their state of inertia. Thus consumers are not so much asked to purchase a Prius as they invited to participate in the Prius narrative.

We observe several parallels between both the "1984" Apple commercial, airing twenty years earlier, and the 2004 Prius ad. Each promises radical change. Each constitutes narrativized subjects-as-agents, provided the revolutionary task of saving civilization. Each situates consumption as the revolutionary vehicle, set against the dystopic backdrop of the status quo. Each offers a stark contrast between stillness and movement while also challenging conceptions of stillness and movement in the process. For example, whereas Apply transforms computing into physical action, Prius transforms environmental sustainability into fast paced activity. Yet there is one important difference between the two ads: Prius' narrativized subject is the tool itself. Prius becomes the agent and agency of social change, embodied in its own consumption. The narrative is literally driven by technology, reducing human agents to frustrated, passive onlookers. The only human drivers featured are those in the other cars, hopelessly waiting in traffic. The Prius emerges to help return humans to their humanity, to their forward motion.

The 2010, "third generation" Prius commercial pushes the narrative further, as the Prius transforms literally into the engine of life. Once again set against a bleak backdrop, the anonymous town—this time animated—depicts an empty street in the foreground, dimly lit skyscrapers off in the distance. Ominous thunderheads occupy a gloomy sky. With the exception of a few lighted windows in the city backdrop, there are no signs of life in this apparent dystopia. Two seconds into the commercial, the headlights of an automobile enter the frame, followed by the apparent crack of dawn lighting the entire town. Viewers quickly learn that the headlight beams belong to the Toyota Prius, whose entrance into the frame lights up the entire city. It is not sunrise lighting the town but instead the presence of the Prius itself, triggering the Earth's daily cycle. As the Prius travels through the town the surrounding environment literally comes to life, rejuvenated simply by the Prius in action.

Most creatively, the environment is personified by real human beings whose physical presence punctures the scene's animation. As the Prius moves through town, flowers bloom in coordination with its motion, and human faces happily pop out from the field's flowers and flying butterflies. These human faces even emerge from the hanging clouds, which have since transformed from threatening thunderheads to puffy, cumulus clouds looking down in admiration of the Prius. As the scenery brightens**,** music takes shape, a woman now singing the Bellamy Brothers song, Let Your Love flow:

There's a reason
For the sunshine sky
And there's a reason
Why I'm feeling so high
Must be the season
Let your love fly
Let your love flow

Slightly rearranging a few lines in the song, the commercial weaves the lyrics in with the voice of the narrator. The singer notably skips the sixth line, "When that love light shines," visually substituted by the Prius headlights. Halfway through the commercial a narrator announces, "Get more power. Get more space. The world gets fewer carbon emissions. The third generation Prius: its harmony between man, nature and machine." The animated scenery, depicting human bodies as leaves of grass, flowers, butterflies, and clouds helps personify Toyota's slogan for harmony between man, nature and machine. Once again, Prius consumption fuels physical action and, in this particular case, life itself. Human faces are also once again relegated to passive onlookers as the Prius subject saves the day. The Prius does not merely reduce carbon emissions; it is the

source of natural energy. Ethical consumption thus shifts from a waste-mitigating practice to the necessary act of environmental production.

The Prius narratives offer profound rhetorical implications. Through Toyota's deployment of the Prius-as-protagonist a new environmental subject emerges. The Prius frees consumers and their environment from the stagnation of outdated technology and quite possibly from humans themselves. Its power progresses with each generation. In the first ad Prius was merely personified along with other modes of technology. In the second ad Prius subjectivity was contrasted against the immobility of human beings. In the third ad Prius transforms into a God-like engine of life on Earth. The ad arguably aims to replace the citizen-consumer-subject with the citizen-commodity-subject. Consumers are allowed to participate, but they participate merely as peripheral characters in the Prius narrative.

The Prius narratives aim to produce a new citizen-consumer-subject. This subject is a hybrid of the citizen-consumer and environmental technology, the real Prius hybrid. To borrow from the Prius slogan, it is truly "harmony between man, nature and machine." The rhetoric compels citizen-consumers to reevaluate and potentially reorganize their relationship to technology. Consumers do not so much use the Prius as it uses them. Man [sic] does not so much create the machine as the machine unleashes the human subject from the shackles of its own devices. Only through Prius consumption does feckless motion transform into human subjectivity. Simultaneously, only by driving the Prius, as opposed to merely purchasing it, do we benefit Mother Nature. Above all, consumers learn that their participation in environmental sustainability has been displaced by hybrid technology.

Mothers of Invention

Interestingly Toyota's social responsibility teaches similar lessons regarding the relationship between technology and social action. This section explores the rhetoric of its popular, Mothers of Invention initiative. I argue the initiative reemphasizes innovative technology while displacing the role of traditional civic engagement. To that effect, Mothers of Invention constructs narratives that overwhelmingly reward entrepreneurship and consumerism rather than public engagement, teaching individuals to view the former as the latter.

In May 2012 Toyota launched a philanthropic initiative, donating one hundred cars over the course of one hundred consecutive days to the winners of its "Toyota 100 Cars for Good Program" (Toyota in action, 2012d). Voting on Facebook, the public decided which "nonprofit they think can do the most good with a new vehicle" (para. 2). President and CEO Jim Lentz explains:

> Toyota created the *100 Cars for Good* program as a way to give to a variety of organizations across the country and to do so with the help and support of the American public. It's the public vote that decides which organizations will receive a new Toyota vehicle and we are thrilled to see the outpouring of support for the program with thousands of votes. (para. 3)

A diverse group of fifty nonprofits have thus far been chosen, ranging from children centers to animal shelters and recycling initiatives. Perhaps helping to inspire the competition, Toyota had previously teamed up with online periodical, the *Daily Beast*, to award three female groups of philanthropists each $50,000 two months prior. Entitled "Mothers of Invention," the women are each featured on the Toyota in Action website where consumers can learn about these women and their experiences. Here I address each winner's digital narrative, arguing that Toyota

appropriates these projects to further emphasize the entrepreneurial and consumerist qualities of civic engagement.

I will first address recipients, Jessica Matthews and Julie Silverman, inventors of sOccket and co-founders of Uncharted Play (Toyota in Action, 2012c). While undergraduates at Harvard University in fall 2008, the two students were enrolled in a class titled, *Idea translation: Effecting change through art and science*, where they were presented with precisely that challenge. Learning of the developing world's scarce energy supply, including light—often provided only by toxic kerosene lamps—the two developed an idea for generating power at minimal cost. Utilizing what they call "the power of play," Matthews and Silverman devised a method of harnessing the energy generated while playing soccer within the soccer ball itself, which is then used as a source of light.

The invention is genuinely inspiring. That being said, I argue its digital narrative functions primarily to facilitate a civic commitment to consumption and play, while still interpellating individuals as peripheral characters in a technological narrative. Thus that narrative belongs first to the technological subject, which has now simply substituted the Prius with the sOccket. To begin, Matthews and Silverman tell viewers first how they developed the idea and then how they wish to see it evolve. "We're taking an activity which people already derive joy from, and happiness, and saying, keep doing what you're doing because it can be functional." Interestingly, we learn consumers had the power all along, albeit devoid of the proper technology. At no point are systemic forces of poverty addressed, nor is the village asked to modify any practices other than replacing their soccer balls with sOckets. The consumerist logic of the presentation is reinforced by the visual imagery of the video.

The visual trajectory of the video, like that of the Prius commercials, privileges fluid movement over stillness and reflection. The video opens with four still pictures of children struggling to play soccer under their harsh living conditions, as Matthews and Silverman begin to narrate their story. A brief visual tease of the sOccket is quickly introduced, setting the video in motion. Yet as the narrators then describe the nightly routine of families forced to inhale toxic kerosene fumes, four additional stills are offered, depicting the brutal nightlife in the toxic huts. Once the sOccket is officially introduced, however, the video returns to a fluid video stream of children in motion. No stills are subsequently used. Accordingly, the narrators' verbal promise of innovation is visually reinforced by the uninterrupted, optimistic play of children, whose scientific ignorance only enhances the beautiful irony of the sOccket invention—it was not sacrifice but rather play that ultimately saved the community.

The inspiring naiveté of the children at play becomes a visual mirror of the inspiring naiveté of the sOccket's inventors. "It seemed natural to us because we weren't trained in science. All the engineers that we had spoke to were like, no, it's impossible. We just said, shut-up, we're gonna make it possible." Viewers thus begin to see that science plays a precarious role in the women's narrative. While scientific innovation is cast as the solution, scientific discourse becomes the obstacle to its fruition, as the supposed experts lack the necessary foresight to "harness" energy's potential. Thankfully, Matthews and Silverman possess the naivety of children at play—uninhibited by scientific expertise—and thus remain steadfast in their mission. Depiction of scientific authority is rhetorically understated. To that extent, the video's treatment of co-developer, Victor Angel, is particularly telling. Angel tells viewers:

> The technology behind the sOccket is actually very simple. It's like a shake-to-charge flashlight. So it's essentially a magnet moving inside of coils. We applied the same

> simple technology, tweaked [it], and put it in a ball that actually harnesses energy from rotation.

Angel is briefly identified at the bottom of the screen as vice president of product development at sOccket, yet his academic credentials in bioengineering and nanotechnology are not offered (see Unchartered Play, 2013). His presence in the company is also understated through his visible absence in the video, receiving only about twenty-five seconds of footage. Likewise his brief explanation of the technology, primarily emphasizing its simplicity, further privileges naïve ambition over scientific endeavor.

The sOccket's possibilities are practically endless, its inventors proclaim. "Apart from a light we can use the sOccket as a platform to power many different accessories," Angel tells viewers. "You play around with it, you plug in very simply, and your cellphone is charging." Matthews adds:

> I'm glad we have the ball but there's still so much we can do with the sOccket. There's still so much more we can do with Uncharted Play. We have so many ideas in the pipeline of how do you take the play and use it to address real-world issues.

Likewise, the sOccket infinitely extends (as well as spatially flattens) the possibilities of play. The mundane charging of cellphones is seamlessly interchanged with ending global poverty. Both projects require only two things: commitment to consumption and the proper technology to harness its energy. Technology quite literally becomes the instrument of play rather than a product of scientific endeavor. Alternatively, consumers to do not so much use the sOccket as it uses them, harnessing the illuminating potential of innocent play. Matthews continues, "[W]e're looking at significant improvements in the play-to-power ratio." She goes on:

> If you are a creative person—if you feel you can make a change—then you are an innovator, you're an inventor. To invent is just to see the world as you want it to be and do something.

Interestingly, Matthews' criteria include no special skills, training or education. Nor does it include sacrifice or change. The only change mentioned is the very result of play. All that is needed is increased commitment to individual consumption, which is already facilitated and rewarded through consumer culture. To be an inventor is to be a creative idealist unwilling to compromise one's lifestyle.

We observe in the Power of Play an emphasis on creative innovation, harnessing and ultimately transforming the motion of play into genuine social action. We may even say that play becomes a form of labor in that its hidden power generates a new source of energy. Further, its potential was discovered not in the sciences but instead the liberal arts, whose focus on freedom and creativity out-power the dogmatic limitations of traditional thinking. In fact, scientific discourse was originally an obstacle to its idealist "inventors," who fortunately remained steadfast in their "naïve" commitment to play. Simultaneously, subjectivity is transferred onto the sOccket invention, while its consumers merely participate in its energy production. While it is certainly unlikely that Matthews and Silverman are using play as a metaphor for consumption, it is difficult not read Toyota's appropriation of their thoughts and actions in exactly that form. Consumption/play becomes the entry point to alternative energy. Additionally, the video's editing privileges the fluid movement of play over the stillness of material disengagement, struggle and reflection. Rewarded above all are creativity, idealism and perhaps even naivety. At no point are consumers encouraged to make lifestyle changes or even address the potential systemic causes of global inequality necessitating the project in the first place. The lesson instead:

keep doing what you are doing, and we will make it work. There is also a minimal presence of those whom the sOccket was designed to help. At no point does the video attempt to identify or even regionalize those "at play." Viewers are instead presented with vague signifiers of what could be any developing nation and its struggling people. The peripheral Other is reduced to a simple class of peasants saved by consumer innovation. Consumption itself becomes the subject.

The next "Mother of Invention" is Talia Leman, who, when ten years old, helped to raise money for Hurricane Katrina disaster relief (Toyota in Action, 2012a). With Halloween two months away, Talia utilized the tradition of trick-or-treating to encourage other children to follow her lead in requesting coins instead of candy for Halloween. Donations then went to support her relief fund. After *The Today Show* noticed Talia's website she appeared on television generating national support for her campaign. Talia's project, titled, Trick-or-treat for Levee Catastrophe relief (TLC) raised an impressive $10 million, enabling her to branch out to other initiatives, eventually even creating a school in Cambodia. Reporting to have now collected approximately $11 million, TLC became the precedent for what is now the successful nonprofit organization, RandomKid. The name, Talia explains, reflects the power of any random kid wishing to make a difference.

I argue here that Talia's narrative advances Toyota's entrepreneurial depiction of civic engagement. Like Power of Play, Power of Youth emphasizes the power of consumption and innovation, while also privileging innocence, naiveté and randomness over direct political action. Its featured video is narrated by Talia, outlining the trajectory of RandomKid from her inception of TLC to present. Congruent with the tone of Power of Play, Power of Youth champions the unlikely activist. Instead of playing foil to the scientist, however, the protagonist here plays foil to the adult, as it is the child—or at least one with a child's naivety best suited to facilitate social

change. Talia asserts, “Kids don’t know what isn’t possible; therefore everything is possible.” Yet unlike Power of Play, Power of Youth requires children to make one important change to their consuming activities: instead of asking for candy on Halloween children must ask for coins. All other customs are left intact. Children are still invited—and needed—to dress up, parade around their communities and participate in the cultural practice of trick-or-treating. Yet instead of doing so as mere self-indulgence they do so as a means of civic engagement. Operating similarly to the Starbucks campaigns, the ritual of consumption is preserved, while transforming the meaning of the transaction from self-indulgence to social action. What makes the project truly innovative is its capacity to reinscribe Halloween into the realm of social activism without radically disrupting the cultural practice of trick-or-treating. The form of Halloween is left intact while the social cause validates the need for individual consumption.

RandomKid board treasurer (and adult), Michelle Durand-Adams, applauds Talia’s innovative business sense, observing:

> When Talia is helping other kids raise money for whatever their project is a portion of that money actually comes back to RandomKid to provide seed money to start other projects for other kids in other communities. That’s micro-lending. So Talia was basically doing micro-lending before it became popular.

Interestingly, Durand-Adams praises Talia not for the outcome of her initiatives but instead the innovative business-like model she has created. Talia’s true innovation is her circulation of money. Recent criticisms of “micro-lending” as a coercive system of exploitation are also ignored (see Strom & Bajaj, 2010). At no point do viewers meet the beneficiaries of RandomKid, except for a short slide of photographs. Similarly to Power of Play, the beneficiaries of the project are depicted as props rather than humanized in any way. Nor is its success detailed

beyond general statistics, e.g., the money earned and a single reference to a school built. Highlighting instead Talia's innovative knack for unleashing the power of "random kids," the video above all rewards innovative marketing, specifically the ability to generate social power from random acts of consumption.

The presentation also reverses the dominant critique that consumer activism falls short of radical change. On the contrary, Talia is championed for utilizing the small and ordinary, resisting the temptation of radicalism. "It's not that small efforts matter;" Talia explains, "it's that small efforts matter the most, because without these small efforts there is no big outcome." She goes on, "I think innovation is just problem solving, and that's what kids are doing all the time." Likewise Toyota does not so much reward Talia for the $10 million she originally generated to help Katrina victims (the politics of which are entirely ignored) so much as her ability to emulate the consumer-activist model of mobilizing random consumers toward a social cause, the details of which are unimportant. Audiences again learn that individual consumption, when harnessed by entrepreneurial innovation, triumphs over traditional (and authorial) forms of civic engagement.

The final Mother of Invention is Dr. Asenath Andrews, "Detroit's Surrogate Mother" and creator of the Catherine Ferguson Academy for teen moms (Toyota in Action, 2012b). Interestingly this segment cuts against the dominant themes of Mothers of Invention, focusing not on consumption but instead the daily life of more traditional nonprofit work. I argue the addition of this segment demonstrates the complexity of social-responsibility rhetoric, while also providing the exception that highlights the rule of cause marketing. The video begins with Andrews explaining the importance of engaging teenage pregnancy: "One of the most catastrophic parts of teenage pregnancy is that it is the beginning of poverty for moms, for

women and children." Insofar as the video highlights Andrews' innovation, her holistic instruction ranges from traditional academics to farming and global citizenship. Countering the sentiment of small actions leading to global change, the academy teaches students to be global citizens first. One student remarks, "The most important [benefit] is that my son will never be a neighborhood boy; he will be a boy of the world. His life is now of international perspective." Additionally the academy provides daycare for students' children, highlighting communal over individual empowerment. Andrews is the only Mother of Invention completely detached from consumer culture.

The technical form of "Detroit's Surrogate Mother" is also a departure from its counterparts. It is the only one of the three videos allowing its beneficiaries to speak directly with the viewer, highlighting their individual experiences alongside those of Andrews, thereby placing both on equal footing. Focusing on the growth of its students, the video generates a degree of empathy almost absent in the other two. It is also the only video to begin with the narration of its beneficiaries rather than its developer, thus immediately shifting perspective from helper to those helped. The helped are not passive, however, depicted instead as being actively engaged with their education. The active, autonomous struggle of the human subjects striving to improve their lives marks an important departure from the other videos, which have placed all autonomy within the commodity itself. Here labor is privileged over consumption, and only through the arduous commitment of Dr. Andrews and her students is the school a success. Dr. Andrews is also the only person of academic authority (or any authority) rewarded by Mothers of Invention. For all of these reasons Detroit's Surrogate Mother provides an inspiring exception to the otherwise dominant rule of corporate cause marketing and social responsibility.

None of this is to make light of the former projects. Indeed the sOccket is an awe-inspiring invention that will no doubt provide great service to the developing world, as well as quite possibly chart new territory in the discussion of alternative energy. Similarly, RandomKid is an uplifting example of the power of youth and the power of thinking outside the box. It nevertheless gives reason for pause when such breakthroughs are appropriated by and rhetorically situated within consumer culture. It teaches us about the construction of citizenship and social action within the realm of ethical consumption. Both Power of Play and Power of Youth, for example, highlight the social potential of consumption when generated through innovation. *Innovative* here connotes a youthful, optimistic and potentially naïve problem-solver uninhibited by authorial rules imparted by scientists or adults. Yet Toyota's rhetoric is not entirely one-dimensional. Offsetting the consumerist tone of the former two, Detroit's Surrogate Mother privileges sacrifice over play and labor over consumption.

Together the three videos provide a great deal of insight into corporate social responsibility. Toyota remains a leader of ethical consumption because it creatively engages social issues rather than merely provide proceeds to given causes. By actively rewarding innovation rather than merely "giving back," Toyota emphasizes problem-solving over charity, empowering unlikely individuals to change the world. Rather than reduce activism to the ethical purchase, Toyota facilitates a model of innovative consumption as the most viable means of civic engagement. The ethical consumer becomes the entrepreneurial activist, whose innovative commitment to consumption unleashes its power of social change.

Conclusion

This chapter has explicated Toyota's reinscription of consumption as social action, predicated on private technology and entrepreneurial innovation. Drawing on Sarah Stein's

appropriation of Maurice Charland, we observe in Prius marketing the constitutive narrative of passive consumer-subjects waiting to be rescued by progressive technology, dramatically introduced as the Toyota Prius. On all occasions it is the Prius subject and not the Prius driver in control, transforming consumption into environmental action while putting consumers in the passenger seat. Consumers are relegated from ethical subjects to participants in the Prius brand narrative. Similarly, the sOccket invention and the TLC program are championed for transforming consumption into energy and philanthropy respectively. The innovations utilize consumers rather than the other way around. They also aim to transform the ideal citizen into an individual consumer with a naïve disposition and childlike optimism. Public action is rerouted into entrepreneurialism and consumer activity.

The visual contrast between stillness and motion depicted in the texts situates the ethical commodity as an active and transformative agent of social change. Not until the commodity is put in motion does the world begin to change, evidenced by the imagery of the Prius commercials and Power of Play. Ethical consumption is not merely the purchasing of ethical goods but the continuous use of those goods. Environmental sustainability as material disengagement is replaced by the "alternative energy" of material commitment. Alternatively, consumers remain inert until the technological subject releases their potential energy.

Finally, Toyota cause marketing illustrates the power of civic branding, the ethical-consumption equivalent of brand marketing. Consumers are not so much rationally persuaded to purchase Prius automobiles as they are compelled to participate in the Prius brand. The commercials aim to transform the Prius from an ethical commodity to the embodiment of environmentalism. To borrow from Lury (2004), the brand replaces the commodity as the new consumer object-ive. By branding Prius as environmentalism, Toyota rejuvenates ethical

consumption in a way traditional cause marketing has arguably failed to do. Toyota also introduces the Prius as the techno-subject savior, thereby displacing the role of the citizen-consumer. The same trope is present in its social-responsibility narratives, compelling consumers to rethink civic engagement as entrepreneurial activism, what I have labeled a "hybrid" model of civic engagement. All of these dynamics present serious implications for the practice of environmentalism and the possibilities of cause marketing, which critics should continue to explore more thoroughly.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored the growing practice of ethical consumption and the cultural implications of its provocative rhetoric. Specifically it has illuminated the civic rhetoric of three brands: Starbucks, American Apparel and Toyota Prius. These noteworthy artifacts demand critical attention as some of the most culturally iconic and civically engaged brands today. Their critiques offer great insight into the rhetorical complexity of ethical marketing regarding both its possibilities and limitations. Each brand also employs significantly different strategies, demonstrating the heterogeneity of this discourse. We also learn such rhetoric is more sophisticated and theoretically elusive than many critiques have so far considered. Accordingly, our criticism of ethical consumption must adapt to the shifting terrain of ethical consumer culture.

In this conclusion I address the cultural implications of the aforementioned texts. Specifically I highlight the dominant rhetorical strategy pervading all three campaigns, what I call civic branding. That is, I argue these campaigns demonstrate a departure from traditional cause marketing rhetoric by inviting citizen-consumers to participate in the fantasy world of ethical consumption embodied by the civic brand. These campaigns aim to erode any and all boundaries between consumer culture and civic engagement while producing a new mode of ethical consumption in the process. To help contextualize my assessment I revisit the work of rhetorical critic Christine Harold. Next I address consumer-cultural theorist, Celia Lury's work on branding. I then apply Harold's and Lury's ideas to the realm of ethical consumption,

demonstrating how the rhetoric of brand identification has influenced that of cause marketing. I will begin with a review of my critiques thus far.

Summary

The first case study observed Starbucks' attempt to collapse the boundaries between civic engagement and consumer culture by branding iconic gestures of civic engagement in its own image. Removing capital and commodities from its ethical consumption, e.g., coffee for voting, Starbucks obviates criticism of "capitalizing" on civic engagement and secures its legitimacy as a genuine third space. Instead of merely offering a portion of proceeds to a given cause, Starbucks rhetorically situates its coffeehouse as public space temporarily detached from capitalist consumption. To that extent the campaign aims to interpellate individuals as citizens rather than consumers, interacting with Starbucks outside the cash nexus (see Ruzich, 2005). The commercials employ DIY aesthetics, disruptive visual sequences and wordplay to synecdochally reinforce Starbucks' attempt to disrupt the traditional, "philanthropy" model of ethical consumption. In this traditional model individuals purchase a commodity as the means of supporting a cause. In other words, consumption serves as a tool of civic engagement. In this case, however, the model is reversed. Individuals participate in civic engagement, e.g., voting and donating, as their means to participate in the Starbucks brand, e.g., drinking its coffee and wearing its wristband. In other words, civic engagement becomes the consumer's tool or "way in" to participate in the civic brand. Through a variety of innovative marketing Starbucks blurs the lines between consumption and civic engagement. It aims to not only move commodities and establish good will but also and more importantly to brand Starbucks as civic engagement in and of itself. It is a rhetoric of identification over rational deliberation.

The second case study found in American Apparel a sophisticated dress code of consumer solidarity and ethical distinction. Distinguished most prominently by its no-logo aesthetic, the faux bohemian boutique offers its citizen-consumers potential connections to working-class laborers, as well as working-class consumers unable to purchase expensive name-brand clothing. This arguably political aesthetic is reinforced by American Apparel's prominent participation in social movements, regularly protesting in gay-rights and immigration-reform protests. Alternatively, we also observe what may be considered a developing knowledge-economy of ethical consumption. In other words, the consumption of certain brands such as American Apparel functions to signify personal knowledge of public affairs and thus facilitate cultural capital. From the perspective of Bourdieu it makes sense to privilege social and cultural capital at a time when more American consumers have monetary access to high-end, ethical commodities. American Apparel thus signifies solidarity and distinction simultaneously. This playful contradiction becomes an essential quality of the American Apparel brand.

Above all, American Apparel offers the "postmodern" ethical consumer a creative space to practice ethical consumption and fashionable nonchalance simultaneously. It facilitates a sexy-ambivalent disposition I call political nonchalance. Such a dynamic may be particularly seductive at a time when both ignorance and strong political conviction appear equally unfashionable (Eagleton, 2004). Thus consumers can playfully navigate the terrain of fashion and civic identity, perpetually deflecting any and all labels (literal and figurative). American Apparel complicates ethical fashion by incorporating elements of authenticity, solidarity, distinction, civic engagement, and sexuality, all cooperating to produce a unique brand dynamic. Fraught with contradictions, it refuses to be labeled definitively. The no-logo aesthetic most literally demonstrates this refusal, but it is also present in the form of its political engagement.

American Apparel thrives on ambiguity and play rather than argument and rational deliberation, adroitly appropriating brand marketing logic into its civic engagement. It does not so much make an ethical argument as create a civic brand image in which the postmodern, ethical consumer is invited to participate.

The third case study explicated Toyota's appropriation of entrepreneurial innovation to represent environmental action. Drawing on the work of Sarah Stein, we see how Toyota reinscribes consumption as social action through verbal and visual narratives situating the Prius as the new environmental subject. Alternatively, individuals are interpellated as helpless consumers in need of a technological savior. Consumers are then invited to participate as peripheral characters in the Prius narrative, literally energizing the world through its consumption. Consumers do not so much utilize the Prius commodity as it utilizes them. Consumers are merely allowed to participate in the Prius, civic brand. Similarly, Mothers of Invention overwhelmingly rewards entrepreneurial activism that utilizes consumption to make a difference. By demonstrating a refusal to change their consuming behaviors, individuals learn they can change the world. In both cases, Toyota brands itself in the image of civic engagement while branding civic engagement in the image of consumer culture.

These case studies demonstrate above all the sophistication of cause marketing. We learn that ethical marketing reflects an ongoing conversation between marketers and consumers that is always evolving and thus compelling critics to reconsider their basic assumptions regarding this practice. Each text throws a rhetorical wrench into dominant consumer critiques. Starbucks, for example, complicates the consumer-philanthropy critique by inverting it, rewarding citizens with brand participation rather than rewarding consumers with philanthropy. American Apparel complicates the conspicuous-ethical-consumption critique by facilitating an austere and

understated ethical consumer. Toyota Prius troubles the notion of "passive ethical consumption" (Lewis & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005) by reinscribing this practice as productive physical action. Thus it is not enough to merely critique ethical consumption as elitist, hypocritical, reformist, or what have you, just as it is not enough to merely acknowledge its facilitation of consumption (see Brooks, 2001; see also Heath & Potter, 2004). Instead we must additionally critique the sophisticated rhetoric which systematically transforms public perceptions of all of these things. To critique cause marketing is to critique an ongoing conversation always working to create new modes of consumption.

Theoretical Framework

This dissertation has drawn heavily on the work of rhetorical critic, Christine Harold. Harold's critique of culture jamming forces us to consider the changing dynamics of consumer culture and its implications for social protest. Harold's "pranksters" are effective precisely because they adapt to and appropriate new media and marketing strategies in what she calls "rhetorical jiu-jitsu." Harold emphasizes the importance of ambiguity and play, the ability to resist antagonism and rational deliberation in favor of pluralist discourse. The rhetorical strategy is available not merely to pranksters, however. It is first and foremost the logic of brand marketing, making it a seductive engine of consumer culture. My dissertation has demonstrated that it is also an essential feature of cause-marketing rhetoric, taking the form of civic branding.

In the following section I contrast between two models of cause marketing: first, the traditional model of ethical commodification and, second, the developing rhetoric of civic branding. Despite commercial culture's growing shift toward that latter, many critics still appear to evaluate ethical consumption from the perspective of the former. In so doing, we potentially fail to critique many of the most fascinating components of cause-marketing rhetoric. Likewise I

urge critics to adjust their theoretical lens to help critique this sophisticated brand of cause-marketing rhetoric more effectively. I begin with a brief outline of the emergence of brand marketing.

The power of brand marketing was first demonstrated during the late Eighties as companies such as Reebok, and later Nike and Gap, privileged brand identification over product functionality. Nike, for example, added enormous exchange value to a sneaker with minimal use value by identifying qualities such as victory and individuality with its iconic, swoosh trademark. Superstars Bo Jackson and Michael Jordan did not simply endorse Nike, which is to say, bolster its ethos; they embodied its brand image. Brand marketing articulated the ultimate break from traditional, rational-deliberative advertising. There is nothing rational or argumentative about branding. Consumers are not so much persuaded to purchase a product as they are seduced into the fantasy world of the brand. Brand identification is situated as the carrot, perpetually kept out of the consumer's reach.

In her book, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy* (2004), consumer-cultural theorist, Celia Lury, asserts the cultural dominance of brand marketing today. *Logos* refers both to the company trademark and the contemporary *logic* of the global economy. Lury defines the brand as "a set of relations between products (or services) *in time* [italics hers]." The brand is *dynamic*, at once physical and abstract, an object of consumption and a mediation between producers and consumers (p. 3). Indeed this dynamic object is more accurately the outcome of various "object-ives," functioning as the cultural aspirant for producers and consumers alike. In other words, the commodity is merely a tool to participate in the brand dynamic. We may think of the brand as a moving target: "the brand is not a matter of certainty, but is rather an object of possibility" (p. 2). Further, it is "a mode of organizing activities in time and space," in that it

locates, temporalizes and concretizes an otherwise nebulous and elusive cultural dynamic (p. 1). Drawing on media theory, Lury employs the metaphor of an interface to describe the brand's dual function of connectivity and separation. Manufacturers and consumers participate in an asymmetrical, communicative loop. That is, while the brand offers a recursive touchstone between producers and consumers, the former nevertheless wields greater power in organizing the practices of the latter. Even legal discourse has recently helped physically objectify the brand and solidify its organizing potential, referring to the "linkages" and "associations" of its identity markers (p. 14). Thus even the most abstract quality of consumer culture, the brand, is being reified and legally protected.

Lury's theorization is useful in understanding a similar trend within the realm of ethical consumption regarding the function of civic branding. Today we witness a similar trend in the realm of ethical consumption. For some brands, ethical marketing is not so much an attempt to move commodities by way of ethical association (Ethos) as it is an attempt to brand civic engagement in the image of consumer culture (Identification). Many cause-marketers now aim to reinscribe their brands as civic engagement pure and simple. Borrowing from Lury, we may consider civic branding as a symbiotic, albeit asymmetrical, play of signification resulting in the production of a brand affect to which consumers must aspire. The most sophisticated campaigns no longer merely add ethical-symbolic capital to their commodities; they instead come to embody civic engagement. They add an ethical dimension to their brand identities, inviting citizen-consumers to participate in the fantasy world of social action. The product or service is a mere means of connecting with the brand itself. Civic branding establishes a relationship between producers, consumers and social issues, all of which begin to operate within the civic-brand dynamic. The commodity is now marketed as the entry point into the ethical-fantasy world

of the brand itself. The civic brand becomes the real material object-ive of ethical consumers, as facilitated by commercial culture. And like brand identification in dominant consumer culture, it is always kept out of the ethical consumer's reach. To be clear, I do not suggest everything has changed. Producers still aim to move commodities and make a profit. Many companies also still engage the philanthropy purchase, as well as demonstrate other examples of Aristotelian rhetoric. I simply conclude from my analyses that a more sophisticated rhetoric of civic branding is also developing and thus worth our attention.

Some of the most interesting discussion of branding comes from inside the fashion community. Nathaniel Beard (2006) recently urged his industry to engage more vigorously in ethical branding. He argues ethical fashion needs to prove profitable to become sustainable, and this rests upon two things: 1. Create more transparency so companies can no longer merely *appear* ethical; and 2. Facilitate greater consumer pressure on ethical production by way of cultivating ethical fashion through branding techniques. Beard's two criteria clearly demonstrate the tension between logic and identification found within the competing rhetorics of cause marketing today. The first criterion, *create transparency*, articulates the traditional, Aristotelian model of cause marketing, what critics call ethical branding. The second criterion, *cultivate ethical fashion*, articulates what I have been calling civic branding—the identification of a specific fashion with the general practice of civic engagement. Put simply, the fashion industry needs to make ethical fashion *cool*. Beard thus recognizes something many critics do not: The task for the enterprising company is not simply to generate ethos and pathos around ethical commodities, but also and more importantly to identify ethical consumption with specific cultural values—civic branding.

Before moving forward I wish to elaborate on my use of the term, civic branding. I distinguish between ethical branding and civic branding in the following way. As I see it, the former aims to establish good will by making a logical connection between its commodity or brand and a particular social cause, whereas the latter attempts to iconically represent the very idea of civic engagement through the logic of brand marketing. Ethical branding is rational, Aristotelian rhetoric. Civic branding is affective and based on a logic of identification. Both strategies add cultural value to the commodity, but civic branding goes further by creating a fantasy world of brand identification. Whereas the ethical brand sells itself to the citizen-consumer, the civic brand presents itself as a permanent carrot kept out of kept out of the citizen-consumer's reach. The consumer must become worthy of the brand. Ethical branding appears closer to corporate social responsibility, whereas civic branding appears closer to brand marketing. Social responsibility is essentially a corporate plea for community support (and often forgiveness), whereas civic branding entices consumers with the possibility of identifying with a seemingly truer political world.

As Lury (2004) recognizes, branding is asymmetrically situated in commercial culture's favor. We may say the same about civic branding, which always favors the commercial entity over the citizen-consumer. Thus even as ethical consumers demand more from their commercial brands, the savviest brands manage to redirect the ethical burden back to consumers in the process. On one hand, the brand provides consumer access into the world of civic engagement, while, on the other, it conveniently keeps consumers at bay. Consumers help motivate corporate social engagement while corporations help organize consuming practices. In a sense, we might say that everyone wins: corporations are held to higher standards, and consumers build a sense of civic virtue. Yet the communicative loop carefully privileges the role of the marketplace over

that of the public so that consumers are always held subordinate to marketers and encouraged to fulfill their civic identity through commercial consumption.

Unfortunately, many critics fail to distinguish between the strategies of ethical and civic branding. In her article, "Drinking to Live: The Work of Ethically Branded Water" (2011), Emily Potter critiques the bourgeoning phenomenon of ethically branded water. The critic moves past the "naïve dupe" dismissal of ethical branding to offer a more insightful analysis of privatizing water. Potter argues the industry implicitly undermines the function of the State to adequately supply its population with the necessary natural resources. Drawing on Foucault and Agamben, Potter argues that a combination of bio-politics and a perceived state of exception allows for these companies to operate as such, while also undermining State functionality. While her analysis is insightful, her working definition of *ethical branding* leaves something to be desired. Referring to "the linking of ethical associations to already existing brands," Potter says nothing of the consumer's active role in the brand dynamic or at the very least how consumer identities are massaged through ethically branded water (p. 123). Potter employs the term, branding, in the more traditional sense of merely "stamping" a label on a commodity. In this case the presence of an ethical agenda symbolizes ethical commitment, thus adding brand value. Likewise, Potter positions the citizen-consumer as a rational agent aiming to capitalize on the exchange value of his or her purchase. The framework centers on an Aristotelian model of rhetoric emphasizing the ethical utility of the commodity rather than the civic identification of the brand. That is the key difference between ethical branding (philanthropic consumption) and civic branding.

Civic branding aims to collapse any distance between the brand and its cause. Civic engagement is seen in light of the brand image and vice versa. The content of both the social

cause and the purchase is typically emptied, allowing citizen-consumers to interact directly with the brand. For example, Toyota does not merely attach the Prius to fuel efficiency; Prius *is* green energy. Starbucks does not merely attach itself to fair trade; Starbucks *is* civic engagement. American apparel does not merely attach itself to American labor and organic cotton; American Apparel *is* ethical fashion. In these cases, consumers do not merely utilize the ethical commodity to assert social ethos; they generate social ethos through their connection to the brand. The dynamic is perhaps best personified, albeit hyperbolically, in the Prius commercials where the narrative is centered on Prius itself, not as an ethical object but as the new subject of green consumption. The power is always asymmetrically situated in the brand itself.

Lury (2004) illustrates the distinction between commodification and branding through the example of leasing a car. Toyota, she argues, would be happy never to sell another car, as it makes more money from leasing its vehicles, i.e., allowing consumers to participate in the Toyota brand periodically rather than actually purchase the Toyota commodity. While this is a helpful example, we nevertheless see that in either case the individual is still consuming and paying for the commodity just the same, whether purchasing or leasing the car. Thus a better example may be that of the Starbucks voting campaign. In this case, we cannot actually say civic engagement has been commodified because it never receives a monetary value, save perhaps the implied value of a cup of coffee. Nor is this simply another example of offering free commodities in the hopes of building a loyal clientele, thereby boosting long-term sales. Indeed participants are most likely regular Starbucks patrons in the first place. Nor can we merely say that Starbucks is simply "giving back." On the contrary, we observe in the Starbucks voting campaign the rhetorical construction of civic identity, not commodified but branded.

The Starbucks voting campaign succeeds by implicating the Starbucks company, its consumers and the practice of citizenship all within its civic-brand dynamic. All three focal points are rejuvenated and reorganized in light of one another. The Starbucks company becomes civically engaged in light of its consumers voting; citizens are implicated as consumers in light of the Starbucks coffee; and citizen-consumers are interpellated through their engagement with the Starbucks voting campaign. The Starbucks interface grows more dynamic as it conflates the practices of consumption and civic engagement into a single act. We can now locate the Starbucks brand in its commodity, its consumers and its civic initiatives, all of which arguably become interchangeable. Thus the more sophisticated its rhetoric of ethical consumption, the more dynamic the brand becomes. Conversely the more difficult it becomes to criticize its civil discourse. Whereas capitalizing on civic engagement may appear exploitative, the branding of civic engagement seems more innocuous.

If brands are the logos of the global economy, as Lury suggests, and if branding is an important new rhetoric of ethical consumption, as I suggest, brand affiliation may appear the most accessible means of identification for citizen-consumers today. Even citizens operating outside the realm of consumption are susceptible, especially as ethical imperatives become brand slogans and logos. Many Facebook users, for example, recently branded themselves in the struggle for gay-rights equality by changing their profile pictures to the movement's iconic flag logo. Indeed many causes are now accompanied by logos and slogans appearing on bumper stickers, t-shirts and other commercial commodities. Some may be surprised to learn the slogan, "Make Trade Fair," is a registered trademark of Oxfam. Certainly it allows for and perhaps encourages individuals, especially desirable celebrities such as Coldplay's Chris Martin, to appropriate and thereby help circulate its slogan. Martin, for example, has the slogan and visual

emblem (also trademarked) drawn on his left hand before shows, which is then visible to his audience as he performs on the piano. Yet Oxfam nevertheless has the legal power to regulate such appropriation, keeping its brand value intact. While Oxfam is a nonprofit NGO, as opposed to a private corporation, the example nevertheless teaches a valuable lesson regarding the potential branding of all ethical rhetoric. Further, as Andrew Crane (2005) observes, NGOs are operating more and more like brands, thus facilitating the interchangeability of corporate and nonprofit slogans. Such imperatives help organize and energize consumers in much the same way "Just do it" has energized young aspiring athletes to buy Nike. Thus the increased branding of ethical imperatives arguably teaches citizens to act more and more as commercial consumers, while also reducing complex public controversies to iconic brand logos and slogans.

American Apparel demonstrates perhaps the most sophisticated form of civic branding in that it does not even need a tangible logo or slogan to locate its brand dynamic. Thus its very style becomes civic engagement. Its perpetual deference of signifiers, the rhetorical sum of which cannot be reified into any logo, persistently alludes to the location of a brand which is never entirely grasped. To wear American Apparel is to participate in a bohemian-ethical community, signifying not just ethical consumption but also a sense of subcultural belonging and distinction. American Apparel represents more than just no-logo functionality, commitment to American labor, gay rights, and immigration reform. American Apparel is simultaneously transcended through a cultural lexicon of hip consumption: Los Angeles, sexuality, social knowledge, irony, ethical commitment, and political ambivalence. All of these qualities shine through its clothing aesthetic needing no brand metonym to anchor them. American Apparel does not merely *practice* ethical consumption; it *is* ethical consumption.

We can make a similar argument about Prius. While many hybrid automobiles now occupy the market, no hybrid signifies exactly as Prius does. Its name very name, meaning, *to go before*, alludes not only to the Prius as the new environmental subject, discussed earlier, but also to the necessary distinction between Prius and its "generic" hybrid counterparts. In fact Toyota (2009) explicitly makes this distinction:

> The first-generation Prius entered the market in 1997 as the world's first mass-produced hybrid. The name Prius, "to go before" in Latin, became symbolic of a car that was launched even before environmental awareness had become a mainstream social issue.

Thus it is not enough for Prius to merely "go before" the world in environmental sustainability. Its brand name must also serve as a constant reminder that it got there first. The acknowledgment is more than a point of pride (Ethos). It is a perennial distinction between authentic Prius drivers and the "mainstream" of hybrid imitators (identification). Many hybrids exist, but there can be only one Prius. The hidden connotations of the obscure Latin name play further into the new form ethical distinction illustrated in my discussion of American Apparel. Facilitating more than economic exclusivity, Prius invites its knowledgeable consumers to delight in a democratic sparring of wits. In 2011 consumers were encouraged to vote on the correct word for the plural form of *prius*, while offering clever explanations of their choices (Leinert, 2011; Toyota, 2011). To participate in the Prius brand is to make oneself privy to an entirely new field of knowledge regarding ethical consumption.

Thus while we cannot say ethical commodification has failed, we can at least recognize a rhetorical shift to a more sophisticated, civic-brand dynamic. This transformation provides reassuring evidence that citizen-consumers are becoming highly reflexive and critical in their consuming practices thus making ethical marketing a more challenging enterprise (Binkly, 2009).

Still, marketers have apparently have accepted the challenge. As Lury (2004) illustrates, branding has gradually progressed from the primal promise of sex to that of self-actualization. People expect brand identification to deliver ever more fulfillment, which now includes a sense of civic identity. I have labeled this rhetoric civic branding. As Harold (2004) observes, such rhetoric functions to erode the inside/outside binary between consumer culture and civic engagement, facilitating a playful circulation of signs.

Ethical consumption is comprised of numerous ironies. Above all, consumers are told the problems of consumption can only be solved through consumption. Social progress is pitted against government intervention. Self-indulgence is mapped onto civic engagement. Consumer passivity is transformed into genuine social action, while traditional social action is sometimes outright mocked. The entire logic of ethical consumption appears to contradict itself. There are also more subtle ironies. It is ironic that consumption appears the most obvious means of civic engagement to many Americans. It is ironic that the private sphere has branded itself the engine of public action. It is ironic that Starbucks, the world's largest distributor of coffee and one of the world's largest landowners, appears the leading advocate for the developing world. It is ironic that one of the world's largest corporate chains has branded itself in the image of nostalgic simplicity, creating DIY commercials and a faux coffeehouse aesthetic. It is ironic that American Apparel champions the voice of labor even as it is charged with exploiting immigrants, and champions sexual equality under the cloud of sexual harassment. It is ironic that an automobile has become the symbol of environmental sustainability, and that material reengagement has become a sign of civic duty.

Yet not all of these ironies are necessarily negative. For example, it is equally ironic that the fashion of automobiles is gradually shifting from signifiers of machismo and luxury to fuel

efficiency and carbon footprint. It is ironic that clothing fashion is shifting from conspicuity and flash to austerity and solidarity. It is ironic that reading in a coffeehouse, engaging in intellectual discourse, has transgressed the practice of subcultures to that of dominant, consumer culture. Thus, for better and for worse, the entire realm of ethical consumption appears drenched in irony. Yet the worse appears to significantly outweigh the better. These contradictions have become the self-evidential logic, which is to say, the ideology, of ethical consumption as expressed through the rhetoric of civic branding.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation has illustrated the power of cause marketing to rhetorically engulf civic engagement within the contemporary brand dynamic, what I call civic branding. It appropriates brand-marketing strategies in the form of ethical consumption, and sometimes even social protest. In contrast to the traditional, "philanthropy" model of ethical consumption, civic branding aims to connect with consumers according to the logics of brand marketing. It privileges identification over rational argument, while also aiming to erode the boundary between public and private space. Cause marketers downplay the capitalist framework of ethical consumption by locating civic engagement in the brand rather than the commodity. The civic brand becomes the new objecti-ive of ethical consumption. Traditionally ethical consumers utilize the commodity as a tool for social action, or perhaps utilize social action as an alibi for their consuming practices. In the rhetoric of civic branding, however, the brand becomes civic engagement in and of itself. Beyond "selling out" or even "buying in," citizen-consumers must participate in the brand dynamic. While the political and cultural implications of civic branding remain to be seen, this newly developing rhetoric does at least demand more critical attention.

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