In the spring of 2003, an advertisement appeared on the children’s cable television channel Nickelodeon for the Mattel toy company’s recent doll line, Flavas. This ad features young girls of various races and ethnicities playing with female Barbie-type dolls characterized by ambiguous ethnic identities—with “neutral” skin color and vague facial features, the dolls could easily be Latina, African American, Asian, or white. What is clear is that the dolls are urban: they wear clothing that is hip and trendy, they carry boom boxes, and they are sold in boxes with a cardboard backdrop that resembles a concrete wall covered with graffiti. On toymania.com, a Web-based toy outlet, Mattel issued the following press release the week the dolls appeared in stores.

EL SEGUNDO, Calif.—July 29, 2003—Flava, according to “Hip Hptionary: The Dictionary of Hip Hop Terminology” by Alonzo Westbrook, means personal flavor or style. With the nationwide introduction of Flavas (pronounced FLAY-vuhz) this week, the first reality-based fashion doll brand that celebrates today’s teen culture through authentic style, attitude and values, Mattel (TM) has created
a hot hip-hop themed line that allows girls to express their own personal flava.

Born in the world of music and fashion, the hip-hop movement has evolved into a cultural phenomenon and celebrates fearless self-expression through freestyle dance, hip-hop music, street sport and signature fashions. Flavas, for girls ages 8–10, is the hottest doll line to embrace this latest tween trend encouraging girls to show their inner flava to the outer world.¹

The Flavas marketing campaign featured not only ads, such as the one on Nickelodeon, which featured hip-hop music and trendy dance moves, but also a sponsorship of the pop singer Christina Aguilera’s tour, a singer that Mattel claims “personifies the idea of fearless self-expression.” Despite the fact that the word flava, the culture of hip-hop, and the idea of street style all signify racially in contemporary American culture, the racial identity of the dolls is never mentioned in the ads or the press release. While this could have been an interesting opportunity for Mattel to explore issues of different skin color among African Americans, as there is a dark-skinned doll and a light-skinned doll, or racial issues in and between Latinos and African Americans, race in this context is just a flava, a street style, an individual characteristic, and a commercial product.

Like race, gender identity is constructed in the present “postfeminist” cultural economy as a “flava,” a flexible, celebratory identity category that is presented in all its various manifestations as a kind of product one can buy or try on. Signified by the hip consumer slogan “girl power,” postfeminist gender identity is a slippery category precisely because of the ways in which it intervenes in productive ways in traditional ideological frameworks even as it works in other ways to shore up those same frameworks. For example, Nickelodeon is widely lauded for its efforts to champion girls in what has been a historically male-dominated televisual landscape. Proudly celebrating its contributions to girl power, Nickelodeon forced the attention of parents and young people to the connection between these two concepts, “girl” and “power,” a connection that has become normalized within the discourses of consumer culture. In the contemporary cultural climate, in other words, the empowerment of girls is now something that is more or less taken for granted by both children and parents and has certainly been incorporated into commodity culture, evidenced by consumer goods ranging from T-shirts to lunch boxes to dolls proclaiming that “Girls rule!” Like other brands in contempo-
rary media culture, Nickelodeon taps into this commodity-driven empowerment by targeting aspects of personal identity (such as gender and race) as a way to be inclusive; in fact, Nickelodeon’s brand identity is crafted around the way in which the network is different from other children’s media in the way it “empowers” children through (among other things) its commitment to gender and ethnic representation.

On the other hand, Nickelodeon’s ability to claim that diversity matters has proved strategic from a business standpoint, positioning the network as “different” in the competitive field of children’s television. In other words, despite the lofty goals of the channel to empower children, Nickelodeon’s carefully crafted industry identity as the “diversity channel” and a champion for girls is a lucrative business strategy. Within the world of children’s television, representations of race and gender work as a kind of cultural capital, in terms of which it increases the political and social clout of a network to be able to claim that it is “diverse.” As is well known, historically there has been a dearth of diverse characters on children’s television (in terms of both race and gender), and the few that have been represented have been depicted in highly stylized and stereotypical ways. However, in the current media economy it no longer makes commercial sense to ignore girls or people of color as important characters. Nickelodeon has capitalized on the historical invisibility and exclusion of diverse characters and has framed this history as part of a shrewd business strategy. In this way, its decision to create diverse programming is often discussed in such nonspecific terms as “good business,” thus distancing the channel from the political implications of embracing diversity.

These two identity categories—race as a “flava” and girl power—function together in the current media environment to produce categories of identity that are defined by ambiguity rather than specificity, ambivalence rather than political certainty. These mediated forms of race and gender are produced within the specific context of late industrial capitalism in the United States, a moment that has been characterized in racial terms as a multicultural or post-race society and in gendered terms as a postfeminist culture. My concerns in this essay focus on television programming within this “postrace” and “postfeminist” culture and are twofold. First, I explore how these two features of contemporary American media culture function together as a productive kind of tension or ambivalence. The tension resides within the acknowledgment that race and gender are important identity categories to consider in
terms of representation, while at the same time the acknowledgment itself works to repudiate this very importance. Angela McRobbie, writing about how this works within postfeminism, argues that contemporary popular culture is effective in the “undoing of feminism” precisely by appearing to participate in an inclusion of feminist ideologies. I argue that a similar dynamic occurs with recent popular representations of race and ethnicity. Within the contemporary climate, television and media products seem to acknowledge the historical racist landscape of television not only by featuring programming with casts that include people of color but also by incorporating non-white narratives in ads, programs, and merchandise. Yet these particular representations and narratives of race and ethnicity are marketed by media corporations as cool, authentic, and urban and have proven to be incredibly lucrative economic tools for marketing to broad, especially white, audiences. Contemporary marketers, selling clothing brands such as Tommy Hilfiger and soft drinks such as Sprite, have efficiently capitalized on the connection of “cool” with images and narratives of the urban so that popular culture is rife with what Herman Gray describes as the proliferation of difference. This redefinition of the urban stands in contrast to media representations in the United States of the “urban” in the 1980s and early 1990s, which predominantly signified the dangerous “other” and indeed functions to render irrelevant and repudiate those earlier concerns about racist imagery. The representation of the “urban,” like the representation of girl power, is associated with the ideological notion that contemporary American society is a multicultural, postfeminist one in which racial difference and gender discrimination are no longer salient. Race, like gender, comes to us in the contemporary context as a commodity, and as such the ideologies shaping these representational politics are necessarily rethought and recast.

Second, I examine how the contemporary definitions of postfeminism and postracial culture are framed around generational differences. In terms of gender representation, this generational difference appears most often in ideological struggles between second-wave feminism and postfeminism. This particular generational divide revolves most centrally around a general assumption (one that is supported by commercial popular culture) that the goals of feminism have been accomplished and are now history, rendering it unnecessary to continue rehashing old political issues. Regarding postracial culture, these generational differences have a more specific economic angle. That is, in what Christopher Smith calls the “New Economy” of the late twentieth century
and early twenty-first the tropes of the urban and hip-hop culture are used as means to designate a particular national perspective on diversity. Despite the material realities of poverty, unemployment, and general institutionalized racism in the United States, a contemporary ideology about race casts it as a style, an aesthetic, a hip way of being. Indeed, Smith identifies the 1990s New Economy as one in which “hip-hop evolved from being the symbolic anathema of the dominant commercial apparatus to serving as one of its most strategically effective symbolic instruments.”⁶ Like commodity feminism or what Bonnie Dow has identified as “prime-time feminism,” the commodification of the urban works to diffuse the politics from this particular racial formation, resulting in a kind of racial ambivalence that dominates the representational landscape.⁷ Given the contemporary representational context, what are the consequences when race or gender becomes cultural capital—a “competency” or mode of consumption within the world of media entertainment?

I see these shifts in gender and race representation as located within the struggles between generations so that representation itself becomes an arsenal in a kind of cultural territory war. Within this particular battlefield, the struggles of the past to represent women and people of color are read through a nostalgic lens as an “old school” kind of politics. Indeed, contemporary manifestations of “girl power” and the “urban” render the language of sexism and disenfranchisement as old-fashioned and even quaint. The dismissal of the language and the politics associated with it is characteristic of “new school” politics, where commodity culture is situated not in opposition to those politics but rather provides the very means to exploit and represent these dynamics of race and gender. To demonstrate how this works in television programming, I offer a brief analysis of a very successful Nickelodeon program, Dora the Explorer, and argue that Dora, the intrepid, seven-year-old, Latina heroine of the show, is poised as a global citizen in the New Economy. Before I turn to Dora, however, the generational differences in how girl power and the urban are understood and used by media audiences need to be explored.

**Generational Differences:**

**Grumpy Old Women and a New Generation of Feminists**

In her discussion of contemporary forms of popular culture, McRobbie identifies the 1990s and the early twenty-first century as a “postfeminist cultural space.” This space, she argues, is a context in which “we have a field
of transformation in which feminist values come to be engaged with, and to some extent incorporated across, civil society in institutional practices, in education, in the work environment, and in the media.⁸ However, this engagement most often results in a denial of those very same feminist values so that postfeminist popular culture is more accurately antifeminist in its trajectory. Postfeminism, understood in this manner, is thus a different political dynamic than third wave feminism, which is positioned more overtly as a kind of feminist politics, one that extends the historical trajectory of first-and second-wave feminism to better accommodate contemporary political culture and the logic of consumer citizens. Postfeminism, on the other hand, is as McRobbie puts it, “feminism taken into account,” a process in which feminist values and ideologies are acknowledged only to be found dated and passé and thus negated.

Importantly, McRobbie sees this process of repudiation taking place in the popular media,

where a field of new gender norms emerges (e.g., *Sex and the City, Ally McBeal*) in which female freedom and ambition appear to be taken for granted, unrelent on any past struggle (an antiquated word), and certainly not requiring any new, fresh political understanding, but instead merely a state into which young women appear to have been thrown, or in which they find themselves, giving rise to ambivalence and misgiving.⁹
Part of young female identity in this contemporary context means to engage this media narrative about new gender norms not in a traditional, politically engaged way but rather in what McRobbie calls a “ritualistic denunciation.” This denunciation occurs when feminism is acknowledged but in a trivialized fashion, shelved as something that may have been useful in the past but is clearly out of date in today’s world.

This denunciation of feminism thus informs the ways in which postfeminism situates issues of gender within commercial and popular culture. This commercial embrace of postfeminism is often invoked as the crucial difference between it and other feminisms because postfeminism is understood as more representative for a new generation of women. This struggle over the “ownership” of the politics of feminism seems to be the primary lens through which contemporary feminisms are understood. Indeed, one of the most impassioned discourses involving feminism lately has not been generated by differing political platforms or a specific egregious act of discrimination against women but from the arguments, contradictions, and general disavowals between different manifestations of feminisms. Within the contemporary context there are different feminisms (just as many different feminisms made up the broad second-wave feminist movement in the United States). Thus, the political focus of postfeminism is vastly different from that of third-wave feminism for the former eschews gender politics as rather old-fashioned and dreary and the latter refigures gender politics in a commercially bounded culture. There is clearly a lack of generational cohesion between the various feminisms, making it difficult to figure out one’s position within feminism. And yet, as Lisa Hogeland points out, different generations are not a significant explanation. The alternative, recognizing problems within feminism, means confronting the “unevenness” of the movement itself and the “fundamental differences in our visions of feminism’s tasks and accomplishments.”¹¹⁰ One of these differences concerns media visibility. In part because of the proliferation of media images of strong, independent female characters, many contemporary feminists seem to regard consumer culture as a place of empowerment and as a means of differentiating themselves from second-wave feminists (although empowerment itself is read differently by postfeminists and third-wave feminists). Second-wave feminism has thus tended to be critical of the misogyny of popular consumer culture.

The embrace of consumer culture is the site for tension around the concept of the individual within feminisms as well. One of the key differences be-
tween the “cultural space of postfeminism” and second-wave feminist politics in the United States and the United Kingdom is the focus on female individualism and individual empowerment. As McRobbie points out, postfeminism shifts feminism into the past—not just the ideas and values of feminism but the emancipatory politics and community activism of feminism as well.¹¹ Key to this shift is the fact that in work that claims to be postfeminist there is what McRobbie calls a “double failure,” for, “In its over-emphasis on agency and the apparent capacity to choose in a more individualized society, it has no way of showing how subject formation occurs by means of notions of choice and assumed gender equality coming together to actually ensure adherence to new unfolding norms of femininity.”¹²

This move toward focusing on individual empowerment rather than coalition politics or structural change forces consideration of several questions. Once feminism is represented as a commodity in precisely the mainstream it has traditionally challenged, can we still talk about it as political? Can the social elements of feminism be represented and enacted within the context of popular culture’s relentless celebration of the individual or is popular culture by design hostile to feminism? Are we simply living in, as Naomi Klein claims, a “Representation Nation,” where visibility in the media takes precedence over “real” politics?¹³ Again, for those who consider themselves to be third-wave feminists, such as Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, the argument is made that this kind of media visibility is absolutely crucial to politics.¹⁴ For those who position themselves as postfeminists, this kind of media visibility is precisely the evidence needed to “prove” that there is no longer a need for feminist politics. And yet, as Bonnie Dow argues, while the liberal feminist politics of equal opportunity and equal pay for equal work has been somewhat normalized (although the material reality of this politics is not always or even often achieved), it is also the case that the process of mainstreaming an oppositional politics often functions as a hegemonic strategy to diffuse that very politics. In other words, the normalization of feminism has prevented it from existing as a discrete politics; rather it emerges as a kind of slogan or generalized “brand.”¹⁵

However, for third-wave feminism, this normalization of feminism within the media and popular culture has encouraged an embrace of feminism as political; as Baumgardner and Richards argue, the young women who make up the third wave were “born with feminism simply in the water,” a kind of “po-
political fluoride” that protects against the “decay” of earlier sexism and gender discrimination.¹⁶ The struggle for “positive” representations in the media is certainly not over, but we also do not experience the same media that we did even ten years ago, when, as Susan Douglas contends, the most pervasive media story remained “structured around boys taking action, girls waiting for the boys, and girls rescued by the boys.”¹⁷ There has been a clear historical trajectory of incorporating feminist ideologies into mainstream popular culture, ranging, as Dow points out, from the 1970s television show One Day at a Time to shows in the 1980s and 1990s such as Murphy Brown and Designing Women.

As a contemporary social and political movement, then, feminism itself has been rescripted (though not necessarily disavowed) so as to allow its smooth incorporation into the world of commerce and corporate culture—what Robert Goldman calls “commodity feminism.”¹⁸ This commodity feminism has resulted in a complex dynamic that is directly concerned not only with general gender issues but also with issues of cultural territory. As part of a general self-identification, second-wave feminism is at times overly romanticized in terms of its commitment to social protest politics, and there seems to be a kind of reluctance on the part of second-wave feminists to rethink and redefine politics according to the stated needs and desires of contemporary feminism (Susan Brownmiller, in a now infamous Time magazine interview about third-wave feminists and postfeminists, claimed that “they’re just not movement people”).¹⁹ Part of this reluctance to rethink contemporary feminism concerns the ways in which gender identity is also always about racial identity; perhaps because of the commercial “urban” context of many contemporary feminists, the intersectionality of race and gender has been acknowledged in ways that challenge the exclusionary history of second-wave feminism. For many third-wave feminists, the territorialism that surrounds some of the current politics of feminism seems to be about salvaging the term feminism (and presumably the politics that grounds and historicizes it). Baumgardner and Richards, Barbara Findlen, and Naomi Wolf, for example, participate in this kind of salvation project, the project of not necessarily appropriating a historical concept of feminism but widening its borders to include more contemporary manifestations of the politics.²⁰ While in theory this makes sense, and certainly these authors at times do justice to the legacies of feminisms, Baumgardner and Richards also insist that “underneath all of
these names and agendas is the same old feminism.” However, it is precisely not the same old feminism that structures the politics of third-wave feminism. The insistence that it is stems from a range of sentiments, from nostalgic yearnings for “real” social protest movements to respectful acknowledgments of political practices that open up economic and social opportunities to a sheer base desire to “belong” to something. Without discounting these sentiments, it is also the case that lingering in this generational battle between second- and third-wave feminism has paralyzed the debate and prevented the further development and refinement of a feminist praxis and material feminist politics. In turn, this paralysis has allowed for a more conservative postfeminism to become dominant in media representation, so much so that feminist politics—be it second-wave, third-wave, or some other version—is rendered obsolete in the contemporary historical moment of hip empowerment.

The complexity of the current feminist landscape means that the idea that “we” all share a feminist politics, that we all “want the same thing,” is highly problematic, as it clearly connects to history. Not only does this propagate the mistake made by many second-wave feminists, who insisted on a universal feminist standpoint, but it also functions as a kind of refusal to identify what it is we all apparently want. In other words, if “we” all want the same thing in feminism, what is it: a liberal version of equality, a more radically configured understanding of liberation from patriarchy, or simply a more frequent and “positive” media appearance? And, if this is true, does contemporary feminism address other factors of identity, such as race and sexuality, in ways that challenge the exclusive nature of second-wave feminism? This struggle over territory has encouraged feminisms to exist primarily as part of a turf war. The politics of feminism is quite obviously different for different generations, and third-wave feminists and postfeminists are produced in a very different cultural and political context than were the feminists of the twentieth century. It then becomes impossible to combine contemporary manifestations of feminisms into a singular “movement”; rather, feminisms exist in the present context as a politics of contradiction and ambivalence. Rather than dismissing this politics as an elaborate corporate masquerade, one that intends to encourage an ever more vigorous consumer body politic at the expense of social change, it makes more sense to theorize how power functions in contradictory ways within the context of consumerism.

One way to do this is to situate postfeminism as an ironic configuration

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of power, a configuration that, as McRobbie points out, skillfully uses the language of feminist cultural studies “against itself.”

The ironic use of oppositional language and counterhegemonic practices within mainstream commodity culture has been widely theorized. For instance, Naomi Klein understands today’s brand culture to be using the language of identity politics as an effective means through which brand loyalty can be assured; Malcolm Gladwell has theorized the economic importance of “cool” in the contemporary political economy; and Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter have argued that countercultural values have always been, ironically, “intensely entrepreneurial” (in fact, as they point out, the commodification of rebellion reflects “the most authentic spirit of capitalism”).

McRobbie theorizes a similar kind of dynamic within postfeminist consumer culture, where much of contemporary advertising and popular culture uses a particular kind of irony when representing women, as if to suggest that the “problem” of objectification of women’s bodies is one of history; women “get it” about objectification, and because of this understanding it is acceptable—indeed, even ironically empowering—to objectify women’s bodies in the most blatantly demeaning ways. Thus, popular media function as a kind of critique of mainstream culture through the strategies of irony, camp, and a kind of postmodern cynicism—but within a conventional narrative framework. Current advertising uses this kind of self-reflexivity to both critique and ultimately sell products.

Thus, one of the factors that characterize a contemporary postfeminist generation is this group’s finely honed sense of irony. Decades of economic seesawing, progressively more sophisticated marketing strategies, and gradually more blurry boundaries between consumption habits and political and cultural beliefs have produced, among other things, a generation that is savvy, “smart,” and generally perceived to be disaffected or cynical about culture. This general ideology makes it difficult to sustain an “old-fashioned” feminist politics that involves understanding women as victims of patriarchy, the theorizing of structural impediments in terms of employment and child care, or even more general assumptions about the various ways in which women are oppressed because they are women in the contemporary climate. In other words, the cynicism of the current generation is not only directed toward consumer culture but also toward historical political formations such as feminism.
Part of this has to do with the fact that irony as politics is a much more personal kind of politics than a more activist, public politics. As Jeffrey Sconce says about “smart films” of the 1990s, “American smart cinema has displaced the more activist emphasis on the ‘social politics’ of power, institutions, representation and subjectivity so central to 1960s and 1970s art cinema (especially in its ‘political’ wing), and replaced it by concentrating, often with ironic disdain, on the ‘personal politics’ of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture.”

The consumer culture that Klein characterizes as “ironic consumption” seems to evacuate politics from the landscape in one sense because of the intense focus on personal identity. And it is this focus on personal identity and the rhetoric of choice that characterizes not only postfeminist culture but also the “New Economy” of race, where representations of personal success and media visibility seem to provide enough evidence that historical struggles over the enfranchisement of minorities and minority communities were crucial interventions but are no longer necessary in the current media economy.

**No More *Cosby Show*: Generational Struggles over Race in the New Economy**

In his incisive study of race representation (and specifically the representation of African Americans) on American television, Herman Gray delineates televisual depictions of race as a series of discursive practices that were particularly relevant in the 1980s. He identifies these practices as three interconnected strategies: assimilationist, or invisibility, where blacks are either simply not represented or represented as white people; pluralist, or “separate but equal,” where blacks are represented on television but as a discrete niche or target group; and multiculturalist, or diversity, where Gray sees the “struggle for blackness” taking place in complex and often contradictory ways. The influx of racial representations in the 1980s media landscape did not necessarily reflect a progressive political consciousness about the politics of race but were the result of a convergence of political and cultural dynamics, including the increase of niche channels on cable television, the rise of brand culture, the marketing tool of lifestyle demographics, and the conservative politics of the Reagan administration. In the 1980s, it became palatable—indeed, fashionable—to be multicultural and multiracial (under certain constraints and conditions). Black representation in 1980s media was part of a conservative
appropriation of discourses of “political correctness” as a specific element in brand identity development in a burgeoning brand environment and came to represent cultural capital in this context.

As Gray, Justin Lewis, Sut Jhally, and others have argued, the American sitcom *The Cosby Show*, a hit in the 1980s under the guidance of Bill Cosby and featuring an all African American cast, represents a culturally and politically significant moment in television representations of race. In fact, Gray argues that it is impossible to understand contemporary representations of blackness without a consideration of what he calls “the Cosby Moment.”\(^\text{28}\) He locates the impetus for *The Cosby Show* (as well as other programs that featured African American characters) within a context in which the cultural definition of diversity as a specific marketing tool was beginning to be realized in corporate America. This emergent moment is crucial to consider when theorizing the contemporary context of race and representation, but, as with the generational differences between twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminisms, there is a generational distinction not only between the representations of race on television in the 1980s and the early twenty-first century but also in what these representations mean for a larger political formation.

In other words, what Gray regards as a “struggle for blackness” that took place over representational issues of the 1980s is a different kind of struggle in the context of the early twenty-first century. To “struggle” for blackness assumes a kind of stable identity for blackness itself—something tangible and “authentic” and worth struggling over. The struggle to which Gray referred was not simply about a politics of inclusion within the media but more generally a politics of inclusion within all areas of American cultural and civic life. In the current media moment, media representations of people of color are much more commonplace precisely because of the kinds of struggles Gray details and because the connections between media visibility and American cultural life are formulated primarily within consumption practices. Thus, as a way to extend Gray’s historical analysis, I see a slightly different practice occurring within the current representational landscape, a practice that might be called “postracial” or “urbanized.”

Indeed, a more overt connection of race with marketing dominated in the 1990s, especially marketing the “urban” to young, white, middle-class Americans. This was a different kind of urban than the images of urban black underclass that constituted most of the representations of people of color on 1980s
American television. However, the urban image that was increasingly part of the 1990s televisual landscape also contrasted with the wholesome, “positive,” Cosby image of the 1980s. Leon Wynter sees this more recent movement or shift in representation as resulting in what he calls “Transracial America,” which is a “vision of the American Dream in which we are liberated from the politics of race to openly embrace any style, cultural trope, or image of beauty that attracts us regardless of its origin.” Of course, the notion that through a process of urbanization we have been liberated from the politics of race is clearly an illusion, but it is the case that this politics has been reframed within brand culture. Popular discourses of race and images of nonwhites have become cultural capital in the contemporary marketing world, so that, as Gray discusses, there is a proliferation of difference rather than an absence of diversity. This practice can be seen on television channels such as Nickelodeon, where programs feature “diverse characters and themes.” Nickelodeon, like other contemporary media companies, uses newly shaped economic models and an ethnically nonspecific, “transracial” style as a way to appeal to increasingly diverse and segmented audiences without alienating specific groups. As with postfeminist representations, the “problem” of diversity in the current climate is no longer one of invisibility and, indeed, no longer about “separate but equal” doctrine or pluralism. On the contrary, capitalism and brand culture, through the relentless narrowing of marketing niches by means of gender, sexual identity, and ethnic and racial identity, has provided for rather than prevented a kind of diversity. That is to say, particular definitions of diversity are recognized as significant by media outlets such as Nickelodeon because diverse images, like images of girl power, sell well in a segmented political economy. The definition of diversity that has the most economic potential in the current climate is one that relies on a hip, cool, urban, “postracial” style.

The danger, of course, in labeling any kind of shift in discourse or practice “post” is that this prefix implies that whatever it modifies is somehow over—postfeminism, for instance, suggests (and at times insists) not only that feminism is passé but also, more obliquely, that whatever goals feminism sought have been accomplished. As Sarah Projansky has argued, one form of postfeminism clearly invokes a linear, historical trajectory, insisting that if we are in an age of postfeminism then we cannot also be in a moment of feminism—the two cannot coexist within linear logic. However, to call this moment in late capitalism postracial is not to suggest that race and race relations are
somehow irrelevant but rather to think seriously about recent shifts in capitalism that contain and market race and diversity in the media using new strategies. More traditional cultural definitions of race have been repackaged in the New Economy in ways that further disconnect race as a commodity from race as a material and social reality. The representation of race in current media is, on the whole, “positive” and is significant to how race is interpreted and navigated in cultural politics. Because of historical interventions and social change, there is clearly more public awareness concerning “negative stereotypes” of people of color. Yet the various ways in which cultural definitions of race and diversity signify a market orientation toward the “urban” has further consolidated the ways in which race is produced as a particular commodity more than a more traditional kind of engaged politics. This kind of diversity thus functions according to the logic of a different political economic model than the one that supports Gray’s discussion of television images.

What has occurred in the more than twenty years since the 1984 premiere of *The Cosby Show* is that media representations of people of color have proliferated but the connection between individual and group empowerment gained by media visibility and progressive change in poverty levels, unemployment, policy, and education continues to be illusive. Words such as *identity* and *multiculturalism* were, in the 1980s, code words for race; in the early-twenty-first century, these same terms are code words (especially for the consumer market) for “hip,” “urban,” and “cool.” Race, like gender, as a political identity has been appropriated (at least in part) in the dominant culture through the brand identity of the urban and postfeminism. Within this context, I do not want to romanticize a definition of *politics* as something stable and immediately meaningful—or, conversely, to vilify brand identity as exclusively superficial and ephemeral—but I do want to shift the cultural frame through which youth empowerment is understood.

**Visions of Power: Empowerment within a Postfeminist, Postracial, Media Culture**

As I’ve briefly discussed in this essay, one of the interesting, as well as disturbing, consequences of the increasing mainstream visibility of identity politics and multiculturalism is not simply that people of color and girls “matter” publicly through their media and policy presence but also that these groups became the target for corporate America in terms of cultivating specific mar-
marketing niches. Because of the historical connection between empowerment and media visibility within this contemporary context, empowerment cannot be theorized as separate from market strategies but is rather a constitutive element in these strategies. Empowerment is thus discursively figured in at least two ways in this historical moment: as media visibility and market demographic. It is true, however, that there is a particular lack of substance that supports these representations for the number of people of color living below the poverty line in the United States continues to increase, women continue to make only 78 cents to the dollar of their male counterparts, and sexism and racism seem to be as institutionalized as ever.

There is, however, no lack of the image of diversity and gender within media culture; images of savvy, urban individuals and empowered girls function as lucrative commodities in the media marketplace. Advertisements feature young, urban, hip people of all races and genders, the soundtracks of ads and television programs often include urban music (such as hip-hop or rap), words associated with hip-hop culture such as bling and dawg are frequently used in family television, and casts that feature strong, independent young girls in youth television are more the rule than the exception. The taboo long associated with media representations of people of color is no longer salient. As Wynter points out, “As this taboo melts in the marketplace, whether as a reflection of social reality or in spite of it, the underlying energy of desire associated with racial prohibition is being liberated for exploitation by commercial marketers.”³³ This, of course, raises the question of the nature of this liberation. The process whereby images of diversity are liberated from the racist practice of invisibility only to be used for a different set of purposes yet still rooted within the capitalist structure of the media deserve examination. In other words, McRobbie’s proposition that postfeminism is “feminism taken into account” can be amended in the contemporary American context to include “diversity taken into account”—and, like feminism, an institutional kind of diversity is situated within this formulation as something belonging to history.

Thus, while the contemporary visual landscape certainly shares some similarities with that of the 1980s, when the economic and political context made it profitable to include particular representations of people of color and women within popular culture, the political economic landscape has clearly shifted. Race and gender have become even more important commodities
within media culture and thus have achieved a sort of status within media consumer culture. However, as I’ve been arguing, not just any representation of race or gender will do in the contemporary U.S. media context; rather, the kind of ethnicity and the particular gender identity need to be specified. Specific images of ethnicity and gender function effectively as marketing tools within this cultural economy and are used to sell products by appealing to consumers who self-identify as empowered individuals or are “ethnic identified.”³⁴ Race and gender within the current media culture are inextricably tied to dynamics of the market, where segmented marketing strategies and more localized capitalist ventures lead to a consumer-based valorization of self-identity.

This commercially defined articulation of identity needs to be distinguished from other means of self-construction within the social and political world, but the distinction itself is one that is in flux and continually negotiated. That is, when a media audience is “empowered” by images of race and gender, there is no linear connection to empowering communities. Rather, the connection is based on a notion of agency that is consumer driven and thus has consequences primarily in terms of consumption habits and even specific purchases made—a T-shirt that reads “Girls Rule!” perhaps, or a CD by the popular hip-hop artist 50 Cent. The current moment is thus characterized by ambivalence rather than specificity, where an ambivalent identity category such as urban or girl power becomes dominant and is the entry point to a commercially defined “postfeminist” or “postracial” society. As Eric King Watts and Mark P. Orbe argue in their essay about the commodification of race in Budweiser television commercials, this ambivalence is experienced by media audiences as a kind of “spectacular consumption” that works, in this specific case, in particular ways to contain race representations: “As the market economy seeks to regulate and integrate ‘authentic’ difference, white American ambivalence toward blackness is paradoxically both assuaged by its ‘universality’ and heightened by its distinctiveness.”³⁵ This focus on the universality of racially or gender-specific images marks an interesting shift from the logic of clearly defined niche markets (i.e., the African American market, the female market, etc.) to one that is more ambiguous yet still clearly “diverse.”
Dora the Explorer: The Global Individual

Finally the idea emerged to have the star be a little girl with a sidekick partner, but it wasn’t until a Nickelodeon executive attended a Children Now diversity seminar in 1998 that the doors opened for Dora. Did someone say abre?³⁶

While spectacular consumption works in a contradictory way to both challenge and reify dominant ideologies of race and gender in Budweiser ads, hip-hop videos, and prime-time television, I’d like to turn briefly to the children’s cable channel Nickelodeon to examine the representations of postfeminism and urbanization on kids’ TV. Children’s television in the United States has typically been more diverse than prime-time television, primarily because of the assumed pedagogical function of shows such as Sesame Street, Blue’s Clues, and Dora the Explorer.³⁷ Indeed, the twenty-first-century context of postfeminism and the present celebration of urban images have encouraged a lineup of children’s shows that feature strong, smart girls and multicultural casts.

The use of diversity as a part of social identity, and as a more abstract narrative theme, is an important element in Nickelodeon’s claim to empower kids and address its child audience as active cultural citizens. Diversity, for Nickelodeon, is part of the network’s brand identity. Like other brands in contemporary culture, Nickelodeon targets aspects of personal identity such as race as a way to be inclusive. In fact, its brand identity is crafted around the way it “empowers” children through (among other things) a commitment to gender and ethnic representation.

The ability to claim that diversity matters to Nickelodeon has thus given the network a way to stand out in the competitive field of children’s television. In a recent report on diversity within children’s television, the media advocacy group Children Now featured an article written by Nickelodeon’s then-president, Herb Scannell, on the network’s success with diversity.³⁸ As Scannell puts it, “One of the questions we are frequently asked by the media and the advocacy community is why we’ve been able to present a more diverse screen when other networks are often criticized for their lack of diversity. I can only speak for Nickelodeon when I say that it really boils down to our core mission of serving all kids.”³⁹ Scannell explicitly connects the channel’s images of diversity to Nickelodeon’s claims to “respect” kids, thus building...
up cultural capital not only with advocacy groups such as Children Now but also with parents, educators, and others in the television industry. Indeed, within the world of children’s television, racial and ethnic identity works as a kind of cultural capital, and it increases the political and social clout of a network to be able to claim that it is “diverse.” As cultural capital, Nickelodeon’s mission to respect kids and provide a safe and secure environment connects specifically to representation. The network’s claim to empower kids overtly references the historical invisibility and exclusion of people of color that has plagued television since its inception, and the inclusion of diverse casts and characters is explicitly recognized by the network as part of its mission to “respect” kids. As with the channel’s commitment to girls, Nickelodeon has pledged to air diverse programming, created shows that feature nonwhite characters, and developed programming that directly invokes racial or ethnic themes. Diverse programming is, as we have seen, often discussed as “good business,” thus distorting the channel from the political implications of embracing diversity.

_Dora the Explorer_ is one of these programs. Produced for Nick Jr. (Nickelodeon’s preschool lineup), the show embodies some of the contradictory discourses of race and gender celebrated within a contemporary popular culture context. Dora is an animated, seven-year-old Latina with dark skin and brown eyes who speaks both English and Spanish throughout the show. In every episode, the narrative revolves around solving a puzzle or mystery (such as how to find a frog’s lost voice or how to save a baby jaguar) and encourages interactive behavior on the part of the audience. The program itself is structured like a computer game, so there is a cursor that “clicks” on the right answer when Dora asks the audience for help. There are pauses in the program when Dora looks at the audience, waiting for viewers to reply to her questions about the daily mystery, thus encouraging a kind of active engagement on the part of the preschool audience.

The emphasis on audience interaction is, of course, typical of many contemporary children’s programs for which the creators have researched the pedagogical potential of television. It also speaks to a more general cultural shift—signified by postfeminism among other things—that recognizes media audiences as active, savvy consumers. Textually, the tropes of postfeminism and urbanization are evident in the overall aesthetics of the show, including featuring an intelligent girl as a lead character and celebrating a kind of
racial “authenticity” through the physical representation of Dora, the names of the other characters on the show, and the general representational style of the program. The show features both human and animal characters, most of whom are recognizably Latino, in either physical representation or linguistic behavior. Dora’s parents, Mami and Papi, her grandmother, Abuela, and her cousin, Diego, all speak Spanish and English, and animals on the program are gendered and racialized (e.g., as Benni the Bull, Isa the Iguana, and Tico the Squirrel). The home in which Dora resides with her parents is Spanish in style, an adobe building with a red tile roof. While the plot themes of the show are often developmental and pedagogical, the narrative of Dora also frequently references Latino culture, traditions, and styles, though not necessarily in an ethnically or geographically specific manner. All the episodes follow the same format, in which Dora solves a mystery by following a series of clues, guided by her anthropomorphized “backpack” and “map,” and the clues often are framed within an ambiguous Latin American lens. So, for instance, the Latin American rain forest is a frequent destination on Dora’s quest to solve mysteries, a Christmas episode features a Mexican parade called a parranda, and characters on the show play salsa music to celebrate Dora’s successes. One episode, “El Coqui,” based on a famous Puerto Rican legend, involves Dora and a coqui (frog) who has lost his voice and will not be able to sing unless he gets back to his island. Dora and the frog eventually make their way to the island, assisted by a bird named Señor Tucan, allowing the frog to reunite with his friends and family.⁴⁰

The weaving of the Puerto Rican legend into the show and, more specifically, incorporating themes of migration and exile culture as the primary narrative of the episode along with Latino dances and music, are ways to employ the strategy of being racially specific but ethnically nonspecific. In the most recent episodes of the program, this strategy continues to be honed and deployed. Perhaps most overtly, the expansion of Dora’s extended and immediate family has added new dimensions to her postfeminist, “pan-Latino” persona. The show’s producers have added two siblings to the family, twins, and in new episodes Dora is charged with taking care of the babies. The babies, like Dora, are drawn as Latino characters and are spoken to in Spanish as often as they are in English. Dora’s status as a big sister is a frequent theme of current programs (as well as a new theme for toy manufacturing), and the program has smoothly incorporated a nurturing element into Dora’s
adventurous personality. The babies often accompany Dora on her adventures, allowing the show’s producers to both create new thematic ideas for the show and add further elements to its postfeminist framing. Dora teaches the babies to speak English and Spanish, Spanish lullabies are now part of the show, and Dora’s family is featured more centrally. Another way in which the show celebrates a particular notion of “difference” occurs with the addition of Dora’s bilingual eight-year-old cousin. Diego Marquez, who was introduced in Dora the Explorer as someone who helps animals in danger, now has his own show, Go Diego Go!, which is also part of Nickelodeon’s preschool programming package. The program continues the theme of Dora through its celebration of “authentic” Latin American culture: the animals that Diego rescues are all indigenous creatures to Latin American rain forests, each show contains references to Latin American folktales and traditions, and Spanish is intermingled with English throughout each episode.

Diego’s character furthers the initial strategy of Dora the Explorer where postfeminist culture and the celebration of “difference” function as effective ways to both target and create a particular community of consumers. Dora’s character, as well as Diego’s and others on the show, are depicted in such a way that race and ethnicity matter, though in particular ways, as a kind of “authentic” pleasure and an unproblematic embrace of “difference.” Race, in this context, is not rendered invisible, but it is also not presented as specific and particular. Rather, Dora, like Diego, represents a marketable global citizen. Dora is pan-Latino intentionally so that as a Latina she has a wide appeal for her young audiences across the world. Indeed, her “Latinidad” has been expertly commodified in dozens of toys, books, clothes, and food items that appeal to a wide demographic of consumers, including, but certainly not limited to, American Latinos. In an article entitled “Adorable Dora Is Opening the Doors of Diversity,” the producers of the show comment specifically on her panethnic representation: “‘With Dora, Nickelodeon found a heroine that appeals to kids of all ethnic backgrounds’ . . . [said producer Gifford,] recalling one Chinese child who said, ‘She’s just like me; she speaks another language.’ The creators purposely do not specify Dora’s ethnic background, preferring that she have a pan-Latino appeal, and revised her original green eyes to brown after content supervisor Dolly Espinal pointed out that a majority of Latinos have brown eyes and that it was important to celebrate that.”41 The difference embodied by the character of Dora allows for an
ethnically informed style of politics, yet it is, in McRobbie’s terms, difference “taken into account” yet not necessarily acted on. Challenging racist stereotypes by creating a new one fit for the current political and cultural economy, Dora operates as part of a strategy that motivates a commercially defined notion of diversity. As Arlene Dávila points out in her study about marketing aimed at Latinos, “To sell themselves and their products, those in [the advertising] industry have not only drawn from existing stereotypes . . . but have also positioned themselves as the ‘politically correct’ voice with which to challenge stereotypes and educate corporate clients about Hispanic language and culture.” Nickelodeon’s self-identity as the “diversity station” utilizes a similar kind of strategy through which it gains cultural capital by offering diverse representations to its young audience.

Within the current market environment, a dual process of challenging and reinforcing racial stereotypes in the media is necessary in order to maintain an “ethnic” niche in the market. Yet in programs such as Dora the Explorer, which confront stereotypes as they simultaneously reformulate them for a shifted market, the stereotype that is reconstituted is one that is not necessarily intended for an ethnic niche market but is meant to appeal to a broader (more “global”) audience. Using this strategy, Nickelodeon can claim that the network is committed to diversity despite the fact that this progressive ideology works as a more general market imperative. This strategy works hand in hand with postfeminist politics, where Dora, as a strong, smart, female character, is clearly a product of a culture that recognizes the importance of “positive” gender representations yet does not call attention to any kind of feminist politics other than the politics of representation. Thus, the challenges to dominant stereotypes that Dora the Explorer poses are framed within normative social conventions so that the challenge is contained and made palatable for a media audience. What this means, at least for Dora, is to utilize Latino “themes” as part of the program but in a safe way so as not to alienate Nickelodeon’s predominantly white, middle-class cable audience.

In the case of Nickelodeon, as demonstrated by Dora the Explorer, diversity is less about a specific identity in terms of ethnicity than about an identity as an empowered consumer-citizen. Indeed, the show’s cocreator and executive producer, Chris Gifford, claimed he had “empowering children in mind” when he created Dora. The construction of Dora as a global citizen whose ethnicity is specific but whose appeal is racially nonspecific makes her what
one consultant, Carlos Cortes, calls “a crossover phenomenon and the product of a slow evolution in television.”⁴⁵ This “evolution” in television is indicated by the construction of ethnic markets, an increasingly diverse body of consumers, and the emergence of a cool, more “multicultural” approach to making television shows that corresponds to a general youth market. Another element of this television evolution is signaled by postfeminism, which similarly celebrates the “empowered” consumer-citizen.

**Conclusion**

Within the current media environment, itself a product of a post-civil-rights society, race functions as an ambivalent category in which, on the one hand, race remains an important issue in terms of representation—shown by featuring people of color more prominently (as demonstrated by the Flava dolls) and crafting story lines that focus on race and race relations. On the other hand, the plethora of images of urban and cool people of color in advertising, television programs, and music videos (among other popular culture artifacts) implies that representational visibility no longer has the same urgency. Indeed, the implication is that race itself no longer matters in the same way it once did but is now simply an interesting way to feature the authentic, cool, or urban or develop a theme in a reality show. This postracial television economy is the legacy of diverse programs such as *Sesame Street* and *The Cosby Show*, but it engages these earlier representations of race within new economic models in which the connection between enfranchisement and “positive” images of diversity no longer has the meaning it did in the media context of the 1970s and 1980s. These new economic models also inform the production of postfeminist popular culture, in which “feminism taken into account” is the dominant narrative, effectively framing feminism as history even as a commodified version of feminist ideas and values is normalized.

It is not my aim to resolve these tensions or expose postfeminism or the “urban” as a commercial hoax. It is my goal, rather, to theorize how the contradictory media representations of girl power and urbanization function as a particular kind of politics and as such work to constitute audiences as particular kinds of cultural citizens. The same problems and distinctions that formulate the current postfeminist and postracial cultural space also constitute consumer citizenship: nostalgia, an imagined golden past, superficiality, a focus on the individual, rhetorics of choice reframed in terms of consumer
purchases, and so on. Like consumer citizenship, postfeminist and postracial culture is profoundly, indeed necessarily ambivalent.

Notes

1. Press release, Flava Dolls, Mattel, Inc., www.Toymania.com, retrieved February 2004. Unfortunately for Mattel, Flava Dolls were not a big hit with girls age nine to eleven, and shortly after their release in toy stores across the United States Mattel stopped production. However, clearly this style of toy remains significant, as another brand of similar dolls, Bratz Dolls, produced by MGA entertainment, are immensely popular in the United States. Bratz Dolls are also multiethnic and, according to a fan Web site, are “known for having fun, detailed accessories and play sets which reflect their ‘cool’ (and somewhat materialistic) lifestyle—discos, karaoke and sushi bars, salons and spas, limousines, retro cafes, malls are all available” (collectdolls.about.com, retrieved June 2005).

2. Pierre Bourdieu theorized cultural capital as knowledge, or a kind of competence, about styles and genres that are socially valued and confer prestige on those who have mastered them. He distinguished between economic capital, which refers to the quantity of material goods and income commanded by an individual, and cultural capital, which refers to a kind of competency derived from education, familiarity with a legitimized cultural tradition, and modes of consumption. For more on this, see Bourdieu, Distinction.

3. For more on this subject, see Buckingham, After the Death of Childhood; Buckingham, The Making of Citizens; Seiter, Sold Separately; and Gray, Watching Race.

4. See McRobbie, “Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture.”

5. Gray, Cultural Moves. As Gray argues, this proliferation of images does not necessarily connect with a more equitable legal system or a lessening of racist practices in the United States. In fact, the increasing presence of images of African Americans often obscures the ways in which a racist society functions.

6. Smith, “I Don’t Like to Dream about Getting Paid.”

7. Dow, Prime-Time Feminism.


11. McRobbie discusses this shift to a more “lifestyle” type of politics in “Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture.”

12. Ibid.,” 10–11.


15. The awareness of feminist accomplishments in the areas of employment, wages, and policy led to a widespread adoption of the adage “I’m not a feminist, but . . .” As Susan Douglas argues, the comma in this statement is hugely significant, marking
the contradictions involved in feminist politics: “The comma says that the speaker is ambivalent, that she is torn between a philosophy that seeks to improve her lot in life and a desire not to have to pay too dearly for endorsing that philosophy” (*Where the Girls Are*, 270).

18. Goldman, *Reading Ads Socially*.
25. See, for example, Gladwell, “The Coolhunt”; Klein, *No Logo*; and Quart, *Branded*.
27. Gray, *Watching Race*. While Gray recognizes the historical trajectory of these discourses, he also acknowledges that all three practices continue simultaneously.
32. See Wynter, *American Skin*, and Smith, “I Don’t Like to Dream about Getting Paid.”
34. By this, I do not mean “authentic” ethnicity (i.e., a physical relationship with ethnic identity and history) but rather a more diffused embrace of ethnic identity and the urban.
37. Although these programs take an explicit political position on diversity, and federal regulations in the United States dictate that at least three hours a week of children’s television must be “educational,” there are certainly plenty of programs that are not diverse. Indeed, the enormous market for licensed character products lends itself to rigid stereotypes because simplistic hegemonic images are easier to package and sell—they have a clearer market identity.
38. The network leadership of Nickelodeon has changed since this article was written; in January 2006, Herb Scannell resigned as president of Nickelodeon and was succeeded by Cyma Zarghami.
40. *Dora the Explorer*, “El Coqui.”
41. Cabrera, “Adorable Dora.”

43. This dual function of stereotypes is not unique to Dora, of course, but is characteristic of stereotyping more generally. For more on this, see Bhabha, “The Other Question.”

44. Cabrera, “Adorable Dora.”

45. Ibid.