INTRODUCTION

In an 1880s tour of New York City neighborhoods, Jacob Riis (1971: 118) seemed perplexed that “even where the wolf howls at the door, [African America] makes a bold and gorgeous front.” Much like the subsequent century of scholars, Riis presumed African Americans’ genteel household material culture was an insubstantial facade contradicting their objective identity. Riis reduced commodities in African-American homes to a meaningless “front” which Black consumers fabricated to conceal their “authentic” racial identity. Consumer discourses explicitly and tacitly promised a host of material advantages, civil privileges, and social possibilities, yet Riis denied such rights to African Americans because he assumed consumer culture’s prospects were exclusive to Whites.

Between about 1880 and 1930, American society’s incongruities were tempered by an exponentially expanding abundance of Victorian exotics, pervasive advertising, credit sales, and public marketing outlets, such as department stores (cf. Fox and Lears 1983; Horowitz 1985; Edsforth 1987; Agnew 1990; Cohen 1990; Lears 1994). For many African Americans, the explicit and implied civil privileges of consumption harbored the potential to subvert a host of racist inequalities in political, labor, and consumer space. This commitment to material consumption was typical of turn-of-the-century Americans: Americans representing
every possible social position consumed identical commodities, leading some observers, then and now, to see the origins of a potentially problematic mass culture (cf. Horowitz 1985: 134). A fundamental allure of mass-consumed commodities was that surface attributes like cost, function, and aesthetics were redefined by myriad consumers. Perceptive contemporaries like Jacob Riis pondered apparently familiar objects and material consumption patterns in African America but found those goods and patterns difficult to interpret because they contradicted the popular caricature of Black subjectivity. In his bewilderment, Riis was recognizing that the prosaic meaning of “White” goods belied distinctive material and social symbolism that reflected consumers’ social positions, not their essentialized racial identity.

African Americans certainly were not alone in the symbolic manipulation of commodities, the conviction that consumption conferred fundamental citizen rights, or the optimism that mass consumption forebode an improved society or personal circumstance. However, commodity symbolism assumed a distinctive dimension among African Americans. In the face of racism, the ability to construct and veil their communities in opposition to racism was crucial to African America’s social opportunity and to its very survival. Distinctive African-American consumption tactics reproduced and often concealed African-American differences while introducing beneficial material changes and demonstrating African America’s suitability to the privileges of consumer citizenship. To many contemporaries African-American consumption appeared to be innocuous, yet many African-Americans contested anti-Black racism, appealed for civil privilege, and secured the idiosyncratic personal pleasures of material objects through this seemingly innocuous consumption.

It would be imprudent (if not naive) to celebrate African-American consumers’ symbolic creativity and ignore racism’s oppressive impact on African America. The vast majority of African-American material assemblages were dominated by mass-produced goods, but the symbolic resistance of commodity symbolism was fraught with the contradictions of racism. African America’s participation in a racially structured marketplace unavoidably shaped social subjectivity in ways African-American consumers often did not intend or recognize. The dominant symbolism of mass-produced goods was rooted in (albeit not determined by) White racism, and even the most self-conscious African American found it difficult to utterly step outside racial subjectivity.

For a century, observers embedded in a racist society typically have assumed that African Americans were too impoverished to consume mass-produced goods, too culturally distinct to find those objects symbolically meaningful, or, at best, were peripheral to the mass vision