Contesting Aspiration: Equality, Empowerment and Media Narratives about Consumption

As I was writing this conclusion, a Facebook friend of mine shared a status update posted by someone in their network. My friend had grown up in one of the townships of the industrial East Rand; as a teenager I’d lived in one of the white suburbs close by, also east of Johannesburg. From what I could tell from the limited public profile of the Facebook member from whom the post originated, they came from a similar background to my friend: township born and raised. The status update said:

You Were Born In A First Class Clinic, I Was Delivered At Home But We Both Survived. You Went To A Private School And I Went To Township Government School But We Both In The Same Varsity/College. You Woke Up From The Bed And I Woke Up Woke From The Floor But We Both Had A Peaceful Rest. You Drank Hennessy & Champagne & I Drank Four Cousins Wine But We Both Still Got Drunk. Your Outfits Are All Expensive, Mine Are All Simple And Cheap But We Still Cover Our Nakedness. You Ate Fried Rice And Roasted Chicken, I Ate Pap And Tomato But We Still Ate To Our Satisfaction. You Ride On Lexus Jeep And I Use Public Transport But We Still Got To Our Various Destination. You May Be Reading This Post From Your Sony Xperia & I Typed It With My Outdated Nokia But We Still Understand The Same Thing… You See Life Isn’t About What You Don’t Have But About What You Have & How You See Yourself. One Is Only Poor If They Choose To Be. Make Yourself Proud And Keep The Hustling Spirit Going And Remember Better Days Are Coming Because After a Dark Tunnel There Is Always Light.

This message, with its thorough capitalization that gives it an air of gravitas and its direct address that immediately commanded my
attention, came up in my newsfeed just as I was grappling with the question of how to articulate the complexities that attach to consumption and material culture in the post-apartheid/post-colonial/global south context. As I was battling with the problem of how to narrate the ways in which humanity and its pervasive encounters with inequality intersect with commodity and media cultures in societies like South Africa, that are characterized by brutal histories of economic exploitation and race-based privilege, my friend-of-a-friend summed it all up for me in one rich, descriptive and profound message. We are all human, they said, but some have an easier, wealthier, less demanding experience of being human. Life is about what we have but also what we don’t have, and we make sense of both in relation to what we see others having and not having. And that seeing not only happens in direct lived experience but is also fundamentally and continuously mediated. All human experience is communicated through the having, or not having, of a range of commodities, services and experiences (more and more of which, like education and healthcare, are increasingly marketized and come with price tags attached). In contexts of great inequality, such as South Africa, where people continuously witness one another either suffering and surviving or enjoying and thriving, consumption and material culture are keys to unlocking some of the complexities of social experience, and how we narrate and make sense of them.

The central argument of this book is that consumption is a crucial lens through which the cultural and social aspects of empowerment, equality, aspiration, development and freedom need to be read. This book is based on the premise that media discourses are a key site of the social construction of consumption, which in turn is a key element of global neoliberalism. By reading the issue of equality through the lens of consumption, and consumption through the lens of the media, the book has presented an insight into the operations of neoliberal power and traced the links between society, consumer culture and the media. The following discussion maps out the empirical and theoretical links between the various case studies that have been presented here. It also makes an argument for the conceptual power of critical research on consumer culture and its place in both media studies and a broader, interdisciplinary critique of neoliberalism. By way of conclusion, and in an attempt to explore, in relation to the work done in this book, the insightful comment of the Facebook friend-of-a-friend, this chapter brings together the key themes in order to theorize the ways in which consumption in the south links with globalized neoliberal culture.