*“Now I Ain’t Sayin’ She a Gold Digger”: Wal-Mart Shoppers, Welfare Queens, and Other Gendered Stereotypes of Poor Women in the Big Curriculum of Consumption*

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In this “paper as performance” presented at a 2008 Curriculum and Pedagogy Conference, the authors examine ideas of gendered consumption and negative perceptions that perpetuate the rhetoric about welfare recipients, particularly African-American women. Utilizing the audience to read aloud quotes from politicians, media, bloggers, pop culture and female welfare recipients, the authors purposely recreated an atmosphere where the voices of poor women were eradicated by opinions of the privileged.

The focus of this paper is how we are socialized into our beliefs about consumption, through advertising and dominant discourse, especially in regards to typecasting poor women as ‘improper’ consumers, in an effort to regularize middle class consumption. Demonizing stereotypes of “the white trash Wal-Mart shopper, the gold-digger, <and> the welfare queen” function to reinforce capitalist ideals regarding economics and proper consumption.

Using the concept of “controlling images” which stereotype Black women to justify racist, sexual and classist prejudices, the authors argue that welfare recipients are often depicted as lazy, excessive purchasers who are at fault for their own poverty due to lack of self-control and inability to make responsible decisions. These stereotypes can be found in advertising, song lyrics and media portrayals and have created an atmosphere of disgust and unfair perceptions by society towards the poor.

Although research has shown that poor consumers tend to make careful decisions based on what information they possess, society constructs them as a mythical “other” in an effort to create differences and generate justifications for ‘correct’ consumption. The idea that poor welfare users are “responsible for their own poverty” is pervasive in society, with many having been led to believe that “the poor could get out of poverty if only they would learn to act a certain (white, middle class) way.”