Getting Inside the Skin of the Consumer: Race, Market Research and the Consumerist Project in Apartheid South Africa

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This article engages questions of colonial intimacy in the context of the market – specifically, by white commercial sector in apartheid South Africa to lure black South Africans into burgeoning consumer markets. I focus on the 1960s, when the exercise in racial domination grew more ambitious and coercive, at the same time as buoyant economic growth efforts spurred consumerist desire. African consumers were largely invisible and incomprehensible to white businesspeople, who turned to advertisers and market researchers to bring 'the African consumer' to light. This was largely an epistemological challenge – the pursuit of new modes of knowledge about African people, and especially the material intimacies of their daily lives. This article examines this knowledge-making project, along with the anxieties, lapses and contradictions that inhered in it.

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From the late 1940s, many of the movers and shakers in South African manufacturing and commerce—all of them white—became increasingly cognisant of, and preoccupied with, the country's African consumer market as the key to their future prosperity. An increasingly prominent theme at business gatherings and in newspaper and other published articles on the country's economic challenges and prospects, "the African consumer"[1] was also the subject of growing attention among the ranks of leading advertisers and market researchers, nationally and internationally. Their analyses and predictions were mixed, based upon varying measures of the extent of African purchasing power. But in the main they were optimistic, identifying a (literally) golden opportunity to tap into a large and still underdeveloped market. When the leading multinational advertising agency J. Walter Thompson (JWT) commissioned a special study of "the South African Market" in 1960 (as part of a series on world markets), the conclusion was bold, even hyperbolic: "Within the group of 11.5 million South Africans of native, Asian or mixed descent, an evolution

of rising expectations … is taking place. As industry expands and wages increase, this market could rise at rates that would have a greater effect on the economy of South Africa than did mining of gold and diamonds during the first fifty years of the Union."[2]

Local advertisers and market researchers were reaching similar conclusions, as much to punt their profession as to depict the national economic case: "The union's 12 million Africans form the biggest market—actual and potential—for a very large number of the consumer products manufactured by secondary industry. As such they are the natural target for the efforts and ingenuity of those concerned with swinging their tastes, desires and habits one way or the other."[3] Implicit in such declarations was the assumption that the African consumer market was neither fixed nor finite; it was a market in the making, as were the consumers who inhabited it. In these processes, the role of advertisers was seen as key: to "inculcate into the [African] masses the desire to purchase things which perhaps presently don't fall into their mental scope."[4] And for those advertising agencies and their clients who could afford it, the efforts to mould such predilections would depend, in turn, on market research, to establish existing "tastes, desires and habits," and identify ways of extending the lust for stuff already apparent.

This escalating interest in reaching "the Native consumer" as the subject of malleable material desire was at once unsurprising and astonishing. The emphasis on African consumerism as the key to white commercial prosperity in the future was presented as a demographic no-brainer. The African population already constituted a substantial majority, and its growth rate was greater than that of the white population. African purchasing power, too, was on the increase—a consequence of rising levels of disposable income (even if at proportionately lower rates than among whites).[5] As a result, "the African undoubtedly does have money to spend," as one advertising manager put it, "and it is up to every one of us, as advertisers, to persuade him to spend what he has available on our particular products."[6]

It was equally unsurprising in this emergent clamour for the African market that African consumers were rendered as creatures of desire, amenable to external "persuasion" directed at igniting and moulding their passions. This was entirely in line with the discourse of advertising that dominated the profession at the time. From this standpoint, "our main task in advertising today is to create wants. And in the creation of wants, we are faced with the task of changing inherited ideas, well-channelled emotions, and deep-rooted habits." To do so required essentially affective interventions. Consumer preferences were seen as primarily emotional rather than rational; often operating "on an unconscious level" for reasons little understood by the consumer herself, or emanating from "latent" wants that had not entered the sphere of rational cognition.[7] The enterprise of advertising, therefore, was less about the transmission of information directed to the rational cognitive self, and more a matter of delving into the emotional underpinnings of consumer choices— both to understand and to shape them. Likewise, therefore, the field of market

research required the production of knowledge about consumers' inner emotional lives—and in particular, the things that animated them. It was, in short, an exercise in the engineering of some sort of intimacy: as one market researcher put it, "getting inside the skin of the consumer," into the body of her material desire.[8]

Yet, if efforts to seduce "the African consumer" made strategic business sense, they flagrantly flouted the social mainstream of the apartheid order. By the 1950s, South Africa had become the most racialized society in the world, and the imprints of race were apparent in all spheres of public and private life.[9] Where and how people worked, lived, visited, entertained, shopped, and travelled; where and how they were schooled and worshipped; whom they married and slept with—all were governed by the tenets of rigorous and ubiquitous racial regulations. As the pursuit of racial segregation intensified into the 1960s, this regulatory apparatus grew even more ambitious and aggressive. The primary assumption animating the project was a presumed hierarchy of racial worth, with whites at the apex and Africans languishing at the lower end, limited by diminished levels of "civilisation." This was manifest, in turn, in hierarchies of servility and distance that shaped racial interactions. Apart from some religious gatherings and the small liberal or left-wing circles in which some social racial mixing occurred, it was otherwise extremely unlikely for Africans and whites to socialise together. The focus of market researchers' attention was in the urban areas, where consumerist desires were deemed to be more concentrated and lucrative than in more rural parts. Other than the white state officials charged with the day-to-day governance of their African subjects, only a small sliver of the white population would have ever set foot in an urban township, let alone in an African house. So, how African people chose to dress (outside of the formality of a work setting), their preferred food and drink, their choices of household furniture, cosmetics, medications, music—indeed, all the material accoutrements of their domesticity and everyday leisurely activities, which accounted for their major choices as consumers—were largely beyond the ken of white people, who were typically restricted in their vision and experience to the confines of white society. In short, under these conditions, the relatively superficial material "likes and dislikes" of African people—let alone their innermost consuming desires—were on the margins of white attention and comprehension, if not entirely invisible.

Market researchers set on intimate encounters with African material desire were therefore up against the massive apparatuses of racial differentiation and segregation, and their reach across the gamut of public and domestic experience and consciousness. For all its bulk and force, however, this very system produced some room for manoeuvre, in the porous interstices of the myriad racial exclusions and separations. As scholars of apartheid (myself included) have argued, the economic and social realities of apartheid were governed by a dialectic of proximity and distance: "As much as the racial architecture of apartheid set people apart in racially defined enclaves of power and experience, it simultaneously and necessarily also pulled them together, in workplaces, public spaces and homes."[10] Hence the "disjunctive inclusions"—to use Achille Mbembe's phrase—that undergirded apartheid: the means

whereby African people were "included out" of white-dominated spaces, both present and absent in white lives.[11] This abiding ambiguity opened up the possibility of interracial "intimacy within structures of power"[12]—but without necessarily producing it. Racial proximity per se did not guarantee any interpersonal intimacy; on the contrary, the myriad everyday racial crossings—in the workplace, on the streets of the city, in white homes—were equally compatible with resolute interpersonal estrangement. The extent to which any degree of racial intimacy emerged was a contingent consequence, and an active accomplishment, predicated on particular investments—instrumental and/or emotional—by the people party to those relationships, and shaped by their underlying conditions. The task confronting market researchers aspiring to open up the African market, then, was actively to pursue a degree and form of cross-racial familiarity within the interstices of apartheid segregation, sufficient to open up the "tastes, desires and habits" of African consumers to commercial scrutiny and to breach the hegemony of everyday racial incomprehension.

This paper considers how that challenge was understood and taken up. What was the scale and energy with which market researchers undertook this task? What research techniques were used, and to what ends? What versions of intimacy were envisaged and pursued, and with what effects? The focus is on the post-Second World War period, especially the 1950s and 1960s: the decades in which apartheid reached its zenith as the apparatus of racial regulation strengthened and expanded *at the same time as* the advent of a regime of "mass consumerism" in South Africa. Of central interest, therefore, is how these dual trends, and the tensions between them, shaped the enterprise of market research into the African market and the modes of intimacy considered feasible and desirable.

Existing research on colonial intimacy, influenced preeminently by the work of Ann Laura Stoler, has focused attention on matters of sex and domesticity, child-rearing, and family relations. Because it was here—in the dynamics of close, personal, affective relations—that racial categories were most profoundly undermined, states expended considerable effort at their control.[13] A related though quite separate literature has approached the intimate through material culture. By tracking the production and consumption of commodities, historians have connected the intimate and the everyday with global structures of power and exchange.[14] In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the advertising of these commodities reproduced an imperial iconography of race, "civilisation," and the exotic. Though metropolitan consumers may never have encountered empire at first hand, they became immersed in its representation through the making and satisfaction of their consumerist desire.[15]

Apartheid's consumerist seduction, as a locus of particular types and degrees of intimacy, has a long history in South Africa. As Anne McClintock has argued apropos colonialism generally, a "cult of domesticity … was an indispensable element of the industrial market and the imperial enterprise,"[16] which rendered the intimacies of domestic life a tempting, if not irresistible, space for economic and political engagement. Commercially as well as politically and ideologically, the spaces of family and home life were subject to (varying forms and degrees of) regulation aimed

at shaping the material modalities of domestic respectability and congeniality.[17] As Timothy Burke has shown, the extent and import of such commercial ambitions in southern Africa grew more prominent as the consumerist enterprise grew in scale and traction.[18] By the second half of the twentieth century, South Africa was aligning itself with consumerist trajectories in many other parts of the capitalist world, marked by material and ideological investments in consumerism for all—albeit under undoubtedly unequal conditions. And, as Eva Illouz has argued, these developments in turn tended to articulate—albeit unevenly—with a reconfiguration of the boundaries between public and private spheres, "making the self into an emotional and public matter."[19] The sphere of "private life" became preeminently a site for commercial intervention of increasingly varied and sophisticated means, celebrating the expression of material desire as a route to personal happiness. Of course, such strategies were not uncontested —including in South Africa, where the aspiration to draw black consumers into the cornucopia of stuff produced attendant anxieties in some quarters about the prospect of black people consuming beyond their "proper" racial station.[20] The result was an abidingly contradictory politics of race that would indelibly mark the trajectory of apartheid from its inception, and its deepening entanglement with mass consumerism.

Market research and "the African consumer"

The realities of racial distance confronting market researchers dealing with the African consumer market were clear to some of its leading practitioners at the outset. In 1948, Bantu Press Pty Ltd, a marketing agency with an eye to the African market, put out a pamphlet that gave a bold rendition of the problem of systemic white ignorance and incomprehension of African consumers (with domestic service as the paradigm case), even as it registered the burgeoning marketing opportunities contained therein. The headline dramatically posed the question WHO? in large thick type—foregrounding the triumphant novelty of the question. The text then concretised the question in relation to the myriad commodities that populated white domestic life. "When the day dawns, *who* delivers your morning paper and the milk, *who* makes the pleasant morning pot of Five Roses or Mazawattee Tea? *Who* opens the cartons of Post Toasties, Kellogg's Corn Flakes and prepares Bonny Boy, Tiger or Quaker Oats for the children going to school?"

A list itemising more such commodities consumed daily continued for three-quarters of a page, gesturing repeatedly to the close yet murky presence of African people intimately acquainted with the stuff white people consumed. It then concluded with an answer to the opening question, "WHO?":

> People we see as vaguely as if they were shadows. Black people, 5/7ths of our population, about whom we know so little, yet who know so much about us—our daily needs, our likes and dislikes, our preference for this and that. People who are learning the use of everything we buy and sell: people who are yearning for an ever-widening range of the commodities which we produce. People who are earning more and more each year.[21]

Here then, was the advertisers' opportunity *and* the major obstacle to it, both inherent in the racial order of things. As the pamphlet insinuated, the challenge that the advertisers would need to confront was fundamentally epistemological: how to bring African people out of the shadows of white incomprehension and misrecognition, into an unfamiliar kind of visibility as consumers, enabling a new kind of scrutiny of their "preferences for this and that." And this in turn produced an unlikely—and wholly instrumental—formulation of the problem of racial alterity: how, under conditions of largely monolithic racial subordination, could the African (consumer) speak? It was a question that would shape the early years of market research directed towards the African market, as much in revealing its limits as in bringing this new research enterprise into being.

Market research in South Africa was almost entirely a post-Second World War phenomenon, and its trajectory was closely bound up with the history of advertising in that period, including efforts to improve the standing and influence of the profession. The earliest advertisements in colonial South Africa emanated directly from Britain. By the 1920s, a small national advertising sector had emerged, with Lindsay Smithers Pty Ltd—which would remain the largest local agency for many decades—launched in 1926. From the outset however, this sector was powerfully shaped by the relatively early arrival in the country of big multinational advertising companies based in the USA. Two such giants, JWT and Grant Advertising, set up South African offices in 1928 and in the early 1930s respectively, playing leading roles in what a JWT consultant described as a locally "backward" advertising sector.[22] Not much changed until the late 1940s, when efforts to professionalise the sector gained momentum, with advertisers in the USA and UK as the dominant role models to follow. After a National Society of Advertisers was created in 1952, the first national advertising journal—*The Journal of South African Packaging and Sales Promotion* (later renamed as *Selling Age*)—began publication in 1953, reporting on, among other things, the latest trends and debates in advertising and market research, nationally and internationally—particularly in the USA and UK. In 1958, the first of a series of national advertising conventions was held, showcasing interactions between organised business, leading advertisers and market researchers, some government representatives, and international visitors.

The growth of market research in South Africa formed part of these efforts to develop a more professionally sophisticated advertising enterprise. It had a relatively late start: according to one of the country's first market researchers, Waldo Langschmidt, "modern marketing research methods were only introduced into South Africa on a commercial basis as late as 1947."[23] And the take-up was relatively slow.[24] In the case of African consumer markets, the commitment to market research was even more modest: slower to start and even slower in picking up momentum. In some commercial circles, racially specific market research was considered unnecessary on the strength of an assumption that African consumers did nothing other than imitate white consumer preferences, so that market research into the latter would entirely suffice. Advertising executive Bob Rightford (who had worked at

Grant advertising during the 1960s) recalled that "the typical marketers" attitude was that "blacks are our market, but blacks follow white habits."[25] It produced a simple solution to the problem of racial alterity, by dissolving it entirely: the African consumer did not need to speak for herself, and advertisers could proceed on the presumption of wholesale racial convergence in respect of consumerist wants and desires.

By the middle of the 1950s, however, this position, which rendered the voices of African consumers uninteresting and irrelevant, was beginning to give way, especially at the top end of the advertising market dominated by the multinationals. Indeed, the late 1950s saw a small but determined flurry among the larger advertising and market research agencies to set up divisions or units dealing specifically with African consumers. The market research company Franklin Research set the trend in 1955. JWT created an internal "African section" in 1957, with Grant Advertising following suit in 1958.[26] In 1959, "looking ahead to the expansion of the African market in South Africa," the Society of Advertisers set up its own internal division to monitor developments on this front.[27] And a new market research enterprise, International Consumer Research Company, launched with the express intention to "survey … Non-European markets," along with others.[28] In 1960 the University of South Africa established its own Bureau of Market Research, with the very first research assignment an investigation into income and expenditure patterns among "urban Bantu households" in Pretoria. And as the market research enterprise expanded nationally during the economically more buoyant decade of the 1960s, the trend of drawing on African expertise continued, gaining further momentum.

Clearly therefore, within the space of a few years, a limited—but increasingly focused and energetic—segment of the market research business emerged to deal specifically with African consumers. The following section considers the research techniques used and the versions of intimacy associated with them.

Survey questionnaires

By the 1940s, survey questionnaires—designed to ask uniform questions across samples of consumer respondents so as to quantify the findings—had been tried and tested in market research companies globally, sold under the rubric of "science." In the case of African consumers, the first forays into survey research assigned white researchers the task of administering the questionnaires to samples of African informants. According to Waldo Langschmidt, an early pioneer in market research into African markets, "this step was largely undertaken due to the fact that there were no trained non-white interviewers and it was felt that the use of experienced whites would be satisfactory."[29] But the limitations of this strategy soon loomed large, running up against the realities of racial servility in the country at the time and the forms of strangeness that they imposed. As Langschmidt put it, "On the whole, Bantu are largely employed in unskilled occupations and from childhood have been trained and supervised by whites. This environmental factor resulted in a tendency to please

the white interviewer. This tendency to please the white interviewer was so strong that replies to open questions were always affected. It was even found that two questions completely clashing or opposite in meaning would both result in the reply 'Yes Baas'."[30]

Under these conditions, there was no prospect whatsoever of penetrating the emotional "skin" of African consumers and little point in proceeding with anything other than the most superficial information-gathering exercises. This didn't deter some market researchers, who continued their work in this vein regardless. The more sophisticated among them, however, did rethink their research methodology, and looked to "find Bantu interviewers that were intelligent and sufficiently educated to be able to follow questionnaires and sampling instructions."[31] However, given the realities of apartheid job reservation policies during these two decades, intended to limit African employment in skilled positions, training and employing teams of full-time African interviewers was not on the cards (at least not during the 1950s and 1960s). At best, the services of a handful of part-time interviewers (drawn from the ranks of African university or technical college students) were secured, limited typically to the time of university vacations. So, the recourse to black fieldworkers produced some improvement, but overall the likelihood of generating reliable or interesting findings still remained scant, and the expectations of some of the market research agencies diminished, in line with the abiding epistemological barriers they encountered—resigning themselves to only the most "basic" information about consumer behaviour.[32] Many therefore looked for alternative research techniques that promised greater depth. This was the primary promise, and temptation, of a school of market research known as "motivation research."

Motivation research

Unsurprisingly, given its rapid growth and postwar flux, the advertising and marketing sector was somewhat disparate, lacking a unifying single approach to the enterprises of either advertising or marketing. Some degree of debate on these topics was apparent at conferences and in the text of the national advertising journal. However, from the mid-1950s, the strong imprint and influence of motivation research became increasingly conspicuous—not least as a sign of the international sway of the American advertising world, where motivation research was in the ascendancy.[33] By then, the leading exponent of this approach was Ernest Dichter, the charismatic and self-promoting director of the Institute for Motivational Research, set up in New York in 1955. Dichter built his burgeoning reputation, and marketed his personal brand, by applying elements of Freudian psychology to the spheres of advertising and marketing. Libidinal "human desire is the raw material we are dealing with," Dichter wrote, and it shaped consumer aspirations and choices in ways that preceded—and often eluded—rational reflection.[34] For Dichter, people chose to consume those objects that had become the material extensions of inner, often unconscious, desires. Market researchers, therefore, had the task of delving into the

"inner meanings of object,"[35] using research techniques—primarily, free association and unstructured "depth interviews"—to unlock the unconscious and track this transposition of desire. Rejecting Freudian diagnoses of the complex, often troubling, interactions of id and ego, Dichter produced an entirely positive rendition of a rampant id, harnessed to the embrace of the consumerist cornucopia. In his eyes, giving free reign to such desires was the path to both happiness and freedom—in the perfect conjunction of psychic health and mass consumerism.

For a few years, from the late 1950s, Dichter was all the rage in South Africa's top-end advertising and marketing circles. In January 1958, *Selling Age* announced motivational research as "the key to modern marketing," expressing anxiety that South Africa risked falling further behind than it already was, were it not to pursue this "depth approach" to understanding what made consumers tick. Heralding Dichter as "the parent of motivational analysis in the USA," on the strength of his claim to having been trained in Freudian psychoanalysis, the trade journal acknowledged the importance of engineering consumer desire by shaping unconscious processes.[36] This was made all the more tempting, and urgent, by the anxious declarations in several articles at the time that South African consumers were "saving too much and spending too little"[37]—a malady that Dichter promised to cure once and for all by dismantling rational strictures on unconscious urges to consume.

Dichter made several visits to South Africa, the first in 1958. Speaking at formal gatherings and doing several radio interviews, he offered his services as an advertising and marketing consultant, for a very hefty fee. Apparently, "a record number of advertising and sales executive" flocked to hear him: "Hundreds of the keenest and most imaginative minds engaged in marketing in South Africa came to learn something of the techniques of a man who has genuinely revolutionized the approach to modern advertising…. Unquestionably Dr Dichter 'sold' his audiences on motivational research."[38]

As the local cachet of Dichter's brand grew, some were sceptical of its capacity to deliver on its extravagant promises: "Too ambitious, too costly," said his critics.[39] But for others, especially among the larger agencies with bigger budgets, motivation research was sorely tempting, not least in respect of "the African consumer." Its appeal lay primarily in its research method, which Dichter termed the "depth interview." He described the method as follows:

> A psychological technique [by means of which] respondents are encouraged to express all their thoughts and feelings, in a free, rambling, conversational manner, without concern for the "correctness" of the material. The value of this technique is that it brings to the surface attitudes and feelings about the product which the respondent might be both unable and unwilling to articulate in answer to direct questioning.[40]

In the midst of the epistemological burdens imposed by racial strangeness, here was a genre of market research that promised to cut through the barriers of racial consciousness and enter directly into the unguarded realm of unconscious desire.

So, it was unsurprising that when Dichter visited South Africa again in January 1961, the large audience that attended his talk in Cape Town were especially keen for his advice on how to get through to African consumers. As he told *Selling Age*, "he found during this trip that most South African advertisers are interested in the African market, which is as yet uncharted, unplumbed—and unmotivationally researched."[41]

Dichter's biggest undertaking was a commission for South African Breweries, which was interested in psychological profiles of beer drinkers across the country's racial spectrum. Dichter's study reveals much about the strengths and limits of his interventions in, and contributions to, South African market research. On the one hand, Dichter's credibility as a researcher was tarnished by his ignorance of even the basic demography of race and ethnicity in the country, speaking incoherently about Zulus, Bantus and Xhosas, as though these were racially exhaustive and mutually exclusive categories. On the other hand, his interviews with African beer drinkers yielded some fundamental and pertinent messages that would resonate increasingly powerfully among advertisers who were seriously attempting to cultivate African consumers. The first was to emphasise the centrality of class and generation in segmenting African consumer markets, accompanied by a degree of racial convergence especially in younger generations. This underscored, in turn, the need to disaggregate the category of "the African consumer" and his or her positioning vis à vis white consumers. Reflecting on the study, Dichter wrote

> we tried to distinguish between various tribes as beer consumers: the Zulus, the Bantus, the Xosas [sic]. In reality, our dividing line became much more valid when we let it run horizontally and compared emancipated Zulu with the young European and the young Bantu. Tribal and even colour barriers began to fall. We found that all young people belonging to the same generation regardless of tribe or colour, resembled one another much more than the young Zulu resembled the old Zulu.[42]

Dichter's second and overriding finding was that "the consumption of any alcoholic liquor or brew is invested with profound symbolic significance and is accompanied by deep emotional reactions."[43] Given his abiding ignorance of, and indifference to, the texture of township life and the place of alcohol within it, Dichter was completely out of his depth in trying to fathom what this "symbolic significance" was.[44] But his more general point—that the segmentation of consumer markets along lines of class and generation expressed the correspondingly divergent symbolic meanings of material things—made a powerful mark in advertising and marketing circles, and was increasingly taken for granted as a cornerstone of their work.

By the late 1950s, Dichter's hegemony within the USA was on the wane. His appeal in South Africa lasted longer, into the late 1960s when the explicit recourse to motivation research, and Dichter in particular, receded from the attention of the advertising and marketing sector. By then, however, many of its founding insights had been absorbed into advertising and marketing common sense, not least the conditions of racial convergence, intersecting with class and generational divergence, among the country's consumers.

"Black gurus"

Perhaps because of the difficulties, expense, and limited yields of formal research methods under these conditions, many agencies and retail businesses resorted to a very different research strategy (sometimes in tandem with others) that reverted to a version of knowledge rooted in everyday experience and racial common sense, albeit in this case, on the part of selected African men. From the late 1950s, the multinational market research companies and advertising agencies took the lead in employing the services of "black gurus," as they became known. These were African men who were judged to be authorities on the consuming wants and desires of the African population at large, on the basis of their own experience, and on the strength of which they became key informants, interlocutors, and gatekeepers for white market researchers trying to fathom the "wants" of African consumers.[45] As Bob Rightford put it, the underlying assumption was that "one guy would oversee everything to do with black consumers, one guy to authorise an entire market because he knew his people."[46] When I asked about the question of gender—given that the black gurus were male and African women were an increasingly important component of the African consumer market—he replied: "He had a mother, a sister, a wife—which meant that he knew the market, he knew what women wanted."[47]

The first black guru to be appointed in South Africa was Nimrod Mkele, who took up a post with JWT in 1957. Mkele had excellent credentials for the position. He was the country's first black industrial psychologist, having earned a master's degree in the subject from the University of South Africa. Urbane and articulate, with a reputation for expensive taste in clothing, he was a prominent man-about-town in middle-class township circles, which positioned him well as a sophisticated and persuasive interlocutor between white advertisers and the African market with its upwardly mobile aspirations. Mkele was invited to address the second National Advertising Convention in 1959—the first and only black person with that kind of profile during the 1950s and 1960s. His talk—a detailed commentary on the dramatic changes afoot in the African consumer market—stressed the psychological and social affinity between African consumers and their white counterparts: "The most important values that influence African buying behaviour—and this includes advertising reactions—derive from European standards, which the African has come to accept as the yardstick with which to measure his integration into the society whose ideals he has come to accept as his own."[48]

In this process, Mkele stressed, African consumers were discerning and selective: "He accepts only those white men as his models whose values he regards as meaningful to himself in terms of his psychological needs and rejects those whose values he regards as going against the grain."[49] But his overall message was enthusiastically received, as a resounding reassurance that the African consumer was lucrative, receptive to, and accessible by white advertisers and market researchers. While racial differences were evident, these were not insurmountable in the midst of shared consumerist desires and aspirations. But white advertisers could not rest on

their laurels: "A great deal of consumer research still needs to be done," Mkele stressed, with appropriate guidance and input from African experts (like himself) in this field.[50]

During the course of the 1960s, several other black gurus were appointed, their services apparently much in demand. Some fitted the same sort of mould as Mkele: well-educated, well-travelled and worldly. Others were less well educated and lacked any professional expertise but were selected on the grounds of being amenable, respectable, well-dressed, and socially connected. Bob Rightford recalled Grant advertising's first black guru, Headman Chabaye. "He was about 50 years old, from Soweto, and he knew a lot of people. We took him to client presentations." Smartly turned out, "he was not out of place in any white organisation." Chabaye would be asked to comment on advertising copy on the basis of what he knew about the African market, which was entirely on the strength of his personal experience. "They would take his view; he was the guru," Rightford recalled.[51] Overall, Rightford's portrait of the personae of black gurus was of men with whom white advertisers and retailers felt some social and ideological affinity, recognising a kindred consumerist spirit in the gurus' own material sophistication. Indeed, the encounters with black gurus sufficiently well-dressed to be "not out of place in any white organisation," and apparently well-versed in the aspirant worldliness of fellow black consumers, *performed* a cross-racial affinity in the world of commodities that made the enterprise of market research across racial lines seem both plausible and profitable.

Ernest Mchunu was hired as a black guru by the clothing retailer, Edgars, in 1963. Sydney Press, CEO of Edgars, was keen to expand the African clientele of his store, not least within the largest Edgars store in downtown Johannesburg. By the early 1960s, however, officials within the government ministry primarily responsible for "Bantu affairs" were driving a more assertive version of racial segregation than in the previous decade, and they instructed Press that the extent of racial mixing in his Johannesburg store was unacceptable.[52] Press then set up Sales House, a separate department store, a few blocks away, specifically for his African clientele. Part of Mchunu's job was to promote Sales House and solicit local responses to the new store and its wares, in the larger townships outside Johannesburg, accompanied by his white supervisor, Neville Isdell. The two men spent many hours together, driving through Soweto and other nearby townships, talking to the locals. In his memoir, Mchunu recalls these interactions fondly: "Fortunately, he [Isdell] had his own car, an old Peugeot 403, which we used to visit customers in the black townships to conduct consumer attitudes [sic] towards the Sales House Chain. We had a good working relationship wherein we co-operated all the time."[53]

Black gurus were deployed in various ways. Some of them spoke at advertisers' meetings, presented as founts of knowledge about African consumers. Some became the enablers and facilitators of early focus groups. In Rightford's words, "group discussions were also quite popular. The guys worked with the gurus to source the respondents; he would run the group, together with the research managers."[54] Black gurus also acted as gatekeepers and facilitators, opening doors into township spaces

otherwise closed off to white researchers—such as shebeens (taverns) and corner stores, where informal conversations with locals took place, lubricated by shared food and drink. But the most informative occasions for this mode of market research were probably the conversations between the black guru and his white colleague/s themselves—such as between Isdell and Mchunu, as they drove together through the streets of the townships. Opportunities for male bonding in respect of the shared minutiae of family and working lives, these opened up the kinds of exchanges that would likely not have been possible within the familiar formalities of the business milieu.

Under the skin?

What then, of the impact and significance of these various research efforts? As the previous discussion has suggested, the development of market research into African consumer wants and desires in the 1950s and 1960s was restricted in many ways. Some of these constraints were financial. Market research was largely confined to the multinational agencies that could afford the additional research expenses. Other limits derived from the effects of apartheid's strictures on the growth of African research expertise, along with the pervasive ideological habitus of white supremacy, which produced African interlocutors on white terms. Longstanding racial hierarchies requiring African people to defer to white authority remained intact; likewise, the attendant racial paternalism that rendered African expertise an exception granted special status in a predominantly white world of advertising and marketing expertise. Under these conditions, the expectation that white market researchers might "get under the skin" of African consumers was vastly overblown. Yet, for all these weighty limitations, the momentum and direction that shaped this field of market research arguably did shift the terrain upon which the consumerist enterprise took shape, chipping away at hegemonic forms of racial interaction, and pushing the possibilities for interracial familiarity robustly against the apartheid mainstream.

There were two primary sites of this shift: the first, in respect of how African consumers were represented and understood, and the second, in respect of the kinds of relationships that produced these forms of knowledge. I will take these in turn.

Underlying the market research enterprise as a whole was a notion of African consumer subjectivity fundamentally akin to that of white consumers: people with disposable income, who had options as to how to spend it, and whose choices were shaped largely in the unconscious domain by the symbolic power acquired by particular material things. In this respect, s/he was a subject who could and should be wooed, rather than commanded, much like their white counterparts. This is not to say that structures and repertoires of racial domination were wholly absent in African access to commodities. Laws and regulations restricting where African people could shop and where such shops could be located were one such site of familiarly

authoritarian apartheid injunctions and exclusions. The point, rather, is that the enterprise of growing the country's consumer markets also required a departure from this version of racial subjection, with a serious investment in techniques of consumerist seduction that aimed to persuade rather than command. It had become necessary to take the ordinary everyday lives of African people seriously, in new ways. The exercise was entirely strategic, and largely for the purposes of channelling African disposable income into white hands. Nevertheless, for exactly that reason, it was necessary to operate with a different version of African agency from the apartheid norm.

By the 1960s, moreover, the market research undertaken among African consumers was producing a picture of a heterogeneous and stratified group, rather than one homogenous mass. Motivation research in particular heralded the need to take differences of status, gender, and generation into account, in trying to fathom the symbolic material worlds of African consumers. This was an early version of the idea of distinct lifestyle segments that became de rigueur by the end of the 1970s. And it was starkly opposed to apartheid's version of the African as primordially an ethnic being, for whom the temptations of "western" material consumption were suspect and corrosive.

So African consumers were both fundamentally like their white counterparts, at the same time as racial differences made for specific marketing challenges and advertising opportunities. The question of race, then, sat at the nexus of an unresolved conundrum. On the one hand, market researchers confirmed the need to understand racialized worlds of experience as separate, such that doing market research among white consumers could not stand in for understanding the desires and wants of African consumers. On the other hand, however, their research simultaneously suggested a tendency towards racial convergence, recognising in African consumers the impulse and the practice of imitating their white counterparts.

This same, somewhat uneasy, dualism of racial difference and racial convergence underpinned the practice of market research as much as its findings: in the forms of racial familiarity necessitated by the market research enterprise. Black gurus were invited—in fact, required—to open up new avenues for white market researchers and advertisers into the social life of the township: occasions of convivial, if superficial, social interaction that revealed how African men (and perhaps the occasional woman) enjoyed their beer, talked about their stuff, dressed and danced. These kinds of interactions produced experiences for the white researchers unlike their workplace norms, enabling conversations with township locals, on terms that were not otherwise possible. For all their superficiality, these were social encounters that shifted the conventional hierarchy of authority: the black gurus organised and convened the encounter, into spaces that would otherwise have been inaccessible to the white researchers, who thus knew themselves to be entirely dependent on the resources, expertise, and goodwill of their "guru." The frisson of entering zones that the apartheid norm rendered illicit as well as inaccessible only added

to the experiences of cross-racial togetherness fashioned for the purpose of market research.

The fullest account I have of the unusual (if limited) degrees and forms of racial familiarity facilitated by black gurus is the case of Ernest Mchunu, and his white colleague at Edgars, Neville Isdell, having interviewed them both about their recollections of spending time together in Neville's car as they drove through the streets of Soweto. It was highly irregular then for white people to spend any time in an African township, let alone drive around for hours on end, engaging together in conversations with the locals. They drove with Mchunu in the front seat alongside Isdell, which was highly unusual in itself, given the common expectation that African passengers would sit in the back, as a mark of their servility. Both recall their conversations as having been markedly more friendly and informal than the norm for a white supervisor and his African charge. They talked at length about their children, their wives, and what they each did over the weekends. Both recognised too, that the degree of intimacy that they accomplished had some strongly instrumental underpinnings. Isdell saw that part of his job was to get to know Mchunu himself as a consumer. In many ways, Mchunu's involvement was central to Sales House's marketing enterprise. Conversely, Mchunu was mindful that a good social relationship with Isdell could be very useful to him in his career advancement. Still, both recalled their drives as pleasant and affable; the car provided a venue for two men to work together, talking unusually openly (given their racial context) about the sorts of social and personal information that they could readily share as fellow human beings.

These exchanges also underline, however, the limits of such intimacy. Isdell made it clear that certain topics were understood to have been out of bounds: for example, "we never discussed money—and politics." In the space of the car, apartheid's racial boundaries, then, were stretched—rather than fundamentally breached. And at the end of the day, "he went back to his township, I went back to my home with a swimming pool."

In sum, then, the enterprise of market research opened up a new space of cross-racial familiarity in the world of commodities, its lucrativeness conditional on the congeniality of the cross-racial encounters it facilitated. That this space grew more expansive and robust in tandem with an increasingly aggressive system of racial differentiation and humiliation points to the profoundly contradictory politics of race that shaped the evolution of apartheid and the regulation of intimacy within it.

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Notes

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1 The nomenclature of the period shifted interchangeably between the terms "African," "Bantu," and "native." "Non-European" included "Indians"

and "Coloureds," too. Given the demographics of the country, with an African majority of around 68.5% in 1946 (as compared to a white minority of around 20.5%), the "Non-European market" was almost entirely an African market.

2 JWT, *The South African Market, 1960*, 7.

3 *Selling Age,* August 1957, 16.

4 Comment by Mr O'Grady, national chair of Society of Advertisers, in "Report of the Second Advertising Convention in South Africa," 109.

5 Nattrass and Seekings, *Class, Race and Inequality*, ch. 3.

6 H. Maroun, advertising manager for Bristol Myers, in "Third Advertising Convention," 133.

7 L. Cheskin, "Why people buy," in *Selling Age,* Nov. 1959, 35.

8 M. Dell, "Meeting a Challenge—The Dire Need for Knowledge," in "Report of the Third Advertising Convention," 120.

9 Posel, "Race and Common Sense," 87–114.

10 Posel, "Apartheid Project," 157. For single-volume histories of apartheid, see Beinart, *South Africa*; and Dubow, *Apartheid*. For the social dimensions to racial classification, see Ginsburg, *At Home with Apartheid*; and, for Southern Rhodesia, Shutt, *Manners*.

11 Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity," 48.

12 Hook, *(Post)Apartheid Conditions*, 125.

13 For state regulation in the South African context see Klausen, *Race, Maternity and Birth Control*; Burns, "Controlling Birth"; Roos, "Education, Sex and Leisure"; Hyslop, "Undesirable Inhabitant of the Union"; and Jones, "Homosexuality."

14 de Groot, "Metropolitan Desires"; Walvin, *Fruits of Empire*; and Curry-Machado, *Global Histories, Imperial Commodities*.

15 Richards, *Commodity Culture*; and Ramamurthy, *Imperial Persuaders*.

16 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 5.

17 See, for example, Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, ch. 3; Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*; Modern Girl

research group, "The Modern Girl Around the World"; and Burke, *Lifebuoy Men and Lux Women.* For the African context, see Ross, Pesa, and Hinfelaar, eds. *Objects of Life in Central Africa.*

18 Burke, *Lifebuoy Men and Lux Women*, ch. 4.

19 Illouz, *Cold Intimacies,* 4.

20 A full discussion of South Africa's wider mass consumerist project, and its attendant contradictions and anxieties, is beyond the scope of this paper.

21 *The Approach to Bantu Press Advertising,* 9.

22 Rubenstein Library, JWT papers, Edward Wilson files, Box 16, Junius Cook to Samuel Meek, 6/9/44, re "Future policy in SA," 1.

23 Hagley Library, Wilmington, Box 175, W. Langschmidt, "Studies of South African urban and rural Bantu," 2.

24 See, for example, *Selling Age*, Feb. 1958, 25.

25 Interview with Bob Rightford, 13 October 2011.

26 *Selling Age*, Feb 1958, 29; May 1958.

27 *Selling Age,* May 1959, 25.

28 *Selling Age*, Feb 1959, 23.

29 Langschmidt, "Studies of South African urban and rural Bantu," 4.

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Selling Age*, July 1963, 21.

33 Samuel, *Freud on Madison Avenue,* 37–41; and Schwarzkopf and Gries, *Ernest Dichter*, 5–9.

34 Dichter, *The Strategy of Desire,* 13.

35 Ibid., 91.

36 *Selling Age*, Jan 1958, 15.

37 Ibid., May 1958, 15.

38 Ibid., Oct 1958, 15.

39 Ibid., Dec 1959, 15.

40 Hagley Library, Box 78, E. Dichter, "A motivational research study of beer-drinking motivations among Europeans and Africans and their implications for South African Breweries," March 1964, 11.

41 *Selling Age,* Feb 1961, 20.

42 Dichter, *Motivating Human Behaviour*, 128.
43 Ibid.
44 For alcohol and township life, see Mager, *Beer, Sociability and Masculinity*.
45 I can't find any evidence of a female black guru in this period.
46 Interview with Bob Rightford 13 October 2011.
47 Ibid.
48 "Second Advertising Convention," 123.
49 Ibid., 124
50 ibid. p. 133.
51 Interview with Bob Rightford, 13 October 2011.
52 Mchunu, *Cheeky Native,* 64.
53 Ibid, 71.
54 Interview with Bob Rightford, 13 October 2011.